

THE OTHER THREE



BEN BOLT

H. Bubb,

209

"Gwerton Farm,"

Maisemore,

Gloucester.



THE OTHER THREE

NOVELS
BY
BEN BOLT

PUBLISHED BY
WARD, LOCK & Co., Limited

“ Ben Bolt's novels are always good. They are clean, full of life and thrilling to a degree.”

Devon and Exeter Gazette.

THE MYSTERY OF BELVOIR
MANSIONS
THE SWORD OF FORTUNE
CAPTAIN LUCIFER
JEWELS OF SIN
THE BADGE
THE BUCCANEER'S BRIDE

THE OTHER THREE

BY

BEN BOLT

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

1929

Made and printed in Great Britain by
WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED, LONDON.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I.—THE LONELY BUNGALOW	7
II.—THE ACCIDENT	20
III.—THE MAN IN THE CHAIR	30
IV.—A SECOND MEETING	34
V.—DISCOVERIES	51
VI.—PURSUED	73
VII.—DAVID HARLOWE	96
VIII.—AN OLD STORY	113
IX.—IN THE FOG	131
X.—PERILOUS MOMENTS	147
XI.—AT THE LODGE	164
XII.—A SHOT ON THE MOOR	180
XIII.—IN THE RAIN	200
XIV.—BACK AT HARFORD	217
XV.—A STOLEN RIDE	233
XVI.—A CLEVER TRICK	250
XVII.—AT THE CHURCH GATES	267
XVIII.—DETAINED	285
XIX.—THE LAST HEDGE	300

THE OTHER THREE

CHAPTER I

THE LONELY BUNGALOW

DROPPING in the heather, oblivious of the adders that were said to haunt the sunny hillside, Guy Shortland carelessly surveyed the great moor. Half a dozen tors with their high granite crests lifted themselves to view, and against the skyline his roving eyes caught the outline of a church tower and some high gables that had the appearance of haystacks.

“Princetown!” he murmured to himself.

An expression of reverie came on his handsome face and his grey eyes had an absent look as they stared at the distant skyline. For a moment his mind dwelt on the men incarcerated in the great prison set in the heart of the inhospitable moor, visioning their black lives when the winter winds and mists and snow turned the wide spaces of Dartmoor into a cold inferno, and he gave an involuntary shiver. Then his eyes turned from the skyline to the nearer prospect. Behind him ran one of the two great roads which cross the moor, and turning he surveyed the long reach of it offered to his view. It was empty of life—nothing moving on the three miles of it that were visible. A whinnying sound away to his left made him turn swiftly, to discover

a small drove of wild ponies coming over the slope where he lay, their long manes and tails blowing in the wind. He marked with interest a couple of foals roving with their dams, their ludicrously long legs moving stiffly as if still unaccustomed to the work for which they were intended, and after watching them move across the road, he once more gave himself to the view. Across the valley above which he lay there was a house half hidden in a grove of sheltering firs—a bungalow of grey stone, as yet scarcely weathered, encircled with a wire fence, broken by a white gate which gave admission to a short drive, which from his viewpoint lost itself among the firs.

He stared at the place with some interest, wondering who could have chosen this solitude in which to build his home.

“Must be a hermit or a misanthrope,” he commented aloud, and in the same moment became aware that he was not alone in the landscape.

On the farther side of the valley, seated on a camp-stool, was a man with an easel before him. The easel seemed to indicate the man’s occupation ; and Shortland watched him with idle curiosity, speculating on the possibility of his being the owner of the lonely house. But presently he awoke to the fact that despite the easel before him the man was not painting. There was no movement of the arms, none of the characteristic lifting of the head to view the thing which a man would transfer to canvas. The man sat there still as a rock, alert, watchful,

his face in the direction of the white gate leading to that lonely moorland home. Was he expecting some one to emerge, or was it that inspiration had failed him and that he was experiencing one of those blank periods that are the lot of all creative artists?

As a novelist, he himself often experienced the latter, but if the alternative were the explanation of the man's watchful inactivity, then an assignation was the almost inevitable thing.

He laughed quietly to himself, recognising that his imagination was already weaving a plot about that inactive man before the easel; but a moment later he made a wager to himself that presently a lady would emerge from that white gate across the valley. He let his mind play with the idea. The lady would be young, the daughter of the stern father who had chosen this moorland exile, a man divorced from sentiment, or one of sound common-sense opposed to any lover whose means were rooted in so insubstantial a thing as art. Shortland pictured the brusque parent—a retired grocer perhaps—possibly a stockbroker, or an accountant from an insurance office who—

“Ah!”

The man at the easel had risen from his camp-stool. Was the lady coming at last? He observed the artist closely. The man was staring not in the direction of the white gate; his eyes it seemed were fixed upon the high road which cut the moor in twain like a sword. Shortland permitted himself

a swift backward glance, but saw nothing ; yet the man stood there, watchful, absorbed, in eager poise, plainly expectant. Then through the soft note of the wind rustling through the dry heather came a purring sound which Shortland recognised as the note of a high-powered engine. Again he gave a backward glance, and saw a large saloon car swing out of a dip of the road and climb to the crest of the slope not four hundred yards from where he himself lay.

The purr of the engine softened suddenly ; and familiar with cars as he was, Guy Shortland guessed that the driver had thrown out the clutch and had halted the car whilst he surveyed the moor. In the same instant a movement on the part of the artist arrested his attention. The man was flinging his arms about semaphore fashion, plainly signalling to someone—the man in the car as like as not. A moment later all doubt upon the matter vanished. The purring note of the engine grew more pronounced and watching he saw the car swing forward on the almost level stretch of road behind him. Vastly intrigued, he crouched lower in the heather and beheld the vehicle glide past at a swift pace—a withered-faced man at the wheel, with a second man at his side whose face he could not see.

His eyes followed the vehicle ; he saw it swing sharply to the right, following some bye-way, and then disappear from view in a fold of the moor. The sound of the engine however still reached him, and he waited alertly for the re-emergence of the

car in the valley in which direction it had turned. He waited vainly. Sundry sounds told him that having left the main road the driver was now engaged in reversing the car, then after a little time the engine was switched off, and save for the rustle of the wind in the heather there fell a great silence.

His eyes turned again to the artist across the little valley, and as they did so a light of amazement came in them. The artist was in the very act of sticking his boot toe through the canvas. The deed accomplished, he heaved the ruined stretcher over the wire fence into the fir trees on the other side ; and whilst Shortland, in growing astonishment watched, palette, stool and easel found their way over the fence in turn.

Then the artist turned and, after a glance down the valley, seemed to be engaged in a careful examination of the mahl-stick which for some reason he had retained. Shortland was too far off to make out what he was doing with it, but after a little time the man ceased his examination and stared down the valley, waiting, as the watcher guessed, for the two men from the car whom he had signalled. Presently the man waved an arm impatiently, as if to hurry the men for whom he waited, and half a minute later the pair came into view, climbing up through the gorse which grew thickly on the slope.

More intrigued than ever, Guy Shortland saw the three men meet, confer for a minute or two, then whilst the artist moved towards the white gate

the newcomers slipped over the wire fence and disappeared from view among the trees.

"Why the fence," whispered the watcher to himself, "when there's the gate to go through?"

He was puzzled and interested. That something unusual was afoot was evident; and as he stared at the granite bungalow partly visible through the trees, his mind was busy seeking an explanation of the things happening before his eyes. Plainly the man at the easel had been on the watch for the coming of the others, whose surreptitious approach to this lonely house was, to say the least, curious. Was he watching the beginning of a burglary? Or again, were the trio whom he had seen enter the grounds of this solitary bungalow officers of the law intent on seizing some criminal who had made the house a hiding place? Either contingency was possible, and he waited with feverish interest for what was to follow, ears strained, his eyes fixed on the portion of the house visible through the screening firs.

A quarter of an hour passed and he still watched. Nothing of interest happened. There was no movement in the enclosed ground, and no unusual sound came across the valley. Once an unseen pony whinnied, and once, well to the right on the other side of the depression of the house, there was a sudden scurry of sheep disturbed at their feeding. Then again to his ears there came the purring note which indicated a moving automobile. The sound came from across the valley, lower down than the

place which served him for vantage point, and after a moment's search he saw the car from which it came—a blue splash in the russet heath and bracken.

It was coming up the valley, following a rough winding track which quite plainly led to the house he was watching; a loop road, which, as he conjectured, left the main road lower down, passed the bungalow and rejoined the highway further up, probably at the point where the other car had turned. There was, it seemed, to be another caller at the solitary bungalow.

Without any lessening of interest he watched the progress of the car towards the house. It was still three or four hundred yards away when his attention was diverted by the appearance of a running man at the side of the wire fence opposite him. As he reached the open the man evidently caught sight of the blue car slowly climbing towards the house on a rather noisy first gear. For a second he halted as if he had been shot, then he looked swiftly round and gave a sharp cry of warning.

“Attention!”

Guy Shortland heard the word quite distinctly and his mind translated them instantly.

“Look out!”

A second later the man who had cried the warning dived for the thick gorse which strewed the hillside, and whilst Shortland watched, his companions appeared, glanced once at the approaching car and then sought the same prickly screen. That some

untoward thing had happened in that solitary house half-hidden in the pines, the watcher was convinced. The surreptitiousness of the approach of the men, the warning shout, the unquestionable panic at the sight of the approaching car, left no doubt in his mind upon that point; and as the conviction assailed him, the necessity for some kind of action thrust itself upon him.

Springing to his feet he began to run through the heather towards the point where he guessed the trio had parked their car. It was farther than he anticipated; and the going through the heather was heavy, so that he was much blown when he saw the car with one of the men running towards it, with still a dozen yards to go.

As the hurrying man caught sight of Shortland he checked a little, a look of scared amazement came on his face and a single explosive word broke from him.

“Diable!”

Guy Shortland did not pause. He had no clear idea what he was going to do, but he felt that it was incumbent to call upon the trio for an explanation of their suspicious actions. The Frenchman, overcoming his momentary surprise, looked over his shoulder, shouted something which Shortland did not catch, then began to run forward again.

Shortland reached the car first, but the other, hurrying round on the further side, flung open the door nearest the wheel and began to climb in.

Shortland, aware of the two other men coming up the slope, addressed the man sharply.

"I say, what have you been up to at that house?"

The man flashed a single ferocious glance at him from eyes that were tumultuous with fear and fury. He did not speak, but turning the switch set the engine going, and then looked at Shortland again, and this time snapped a warning in tolerable English :

"Go away or you veel get hurt!"

The tone as well as the words stirred Shortland's anger. He sprang to the running board of the car, and leaning over the side screen addressed the man again.

"That won't wash. You've been at some dastardly game, I'll swear. And you——"

He got no further. The other snatched at something which reposed in one of the brackets of the dashboard, and a second later stood up and struck savagely at him with a short but heavy spanner. Shortland lifted an arm to save his head. The spanner fell simultaneously, and though the full force of the blow was broken it was sufficient to knock him from the running-board to the road, where he lay for a few seconds in a dazed condition, dimly aware that the other two men were running to the Frenchman's assistance.

"H——! Victor," roared one of the pair.
"What——"

The Frenchman interrupted with a vociferous explanation, and with a belated realisation that he

was in considerable peril, Guy Shortland lay quite still, trying to steady his reeling senses. One of the newcomers approached him and, with a savage frown, looked down at him. Shortland lay quite still, with eyes half-closed, giving no sign that he was in any way aware of the fellow's appraising stare. Then the man kicked him and laughed brutally.

" You've given the fool his medicine, Victor. He may be a spy, but he won't trouble us this tide."

" *Non!* But eet ees bettaire dat we go now, before anoder fool arrive, you comprehend. Queeck, *mon ami*, de car ees ready. Queeck, Jeem ! "

The men whom he addressed flung themselves into the rear seat of the car, and as the door was closed with a crash the vehicle moved forward. As it went Guy Shortland opened his eyes to read the number plate, but to his intense disappointment discovered that it was so plastered with dry mud as to be illegible. One of the pair behind—the man who had kicked him—turned round to look at him ; and he lay quite still until the car reached the highway and swung off in the direction of Princetown. When he lifted himself up the driver had accelerated and the trio were rapidly receding. He gave them but a single glance, then still a little sick and shaken by the stunning blow he had suffered, he turned and looked at the solitary house across the valley.

The blue car which had been climbing the rough road had just reached the white gate, and as it came to a standstill he saw the driver—a girl—step out,

move forward and stand for a moment, one hand on the top bar of the gate, staring through the firs towards the house. He watched her with intense interest, and when she opened the gate and passed through, he himself moved until he found a place which through the trees afforded him a glimpse of the house door.

The latter, as he saw, stood wide open ; and though for the moment the girl was hidden by the trees, after a little time she came into view, moving along the terrace in front of the house towards the short flight of steps which ascended to the open door. Quite clearly he saw her hand lift to the bell-push, then she stood in the expectant attitude of one who having given a summons awaits the answer.

The answer as it seemed was not immediately forthcoming, for the hand went to the bell-push again ; and, after an interval, a third time, without anyone appearing from within. He saw the girl look round in some perplexity, then lean forward and knock on the open door. The new summons was no more effective than the bell had been. No one appeared in the doorway, and apparently the house was as tenantless as last year's nest.

Divining her perplexity, he waited, wondering what she would do, wondering why there should be no response to her summons. Half a minute passed and in the interval the girl looked curiously about her, then a little hesitatingly mounted the last step

and entered the house, moving slowly. She disappeared from Shortland's view, and he waited with strained attention for what was to follow. That there was something unusual about that silent house he was convinced, but the nature of it he could not guess. The next few minutes would reveal whether he had suffered that crack on the head in a righteous cause or had been merely a meddlesome fool. He had, however, little doubt where the choice of the alternatives lay. The Frenchman's fear, his ferocious attack, and the evident desire of all three of the men to be gone from the neighbourhood with all speed, were sufficient ground for choosing the first.

The time of waiting was shorter than he anticipated. With his eyes glued to the open door, he was thinking that pursuit of no benevolent purpose could have occasioned the panic the trio had shown, when the girl suddenly reappeared in the doorway. She tottered down the steps, and took the portion of the terrace visible to him at a stumbling run. He lost sight of her for a minute, then glimpsed her through the trees, and almost immediately she came fully into view, running frantically for the white gate.

She reached it, passed through, and ran stumblingly towards her car. There she made two attempts at opening the door, her jerky motions betraying frantic haste, and when the door jerked open she almost fell with the violence of her own effort.

She climbed into the driver's seat and apparently

had some difficulty in starting the car, which to Shortland, divining her state of extreme agitation, was not surprising. He saw her make one or two jerky movements, then leap out of the car and hurriedly raise the bonnet. There followed a moment or two of apparent inactivity, whilst she bent over the engine.

“Flooding the carburetter,” murmured Shortland, and waited for what was to follow as the girl climbed back into the car.

Across the valley came the roar of the engine as she accelerated without having put the car into gear, then at last the vehicle started with a convulsive jerk, which was so violent that the car in turn was jerked out of the straight. The driver, however, recovered herself almost immediately, gave one hurried glance at the house she had so recently left, then drove the car forward along the rough loop road which would bring her straight past the point where he stood. As he realised that, consumed with curiosity to learn the girl’s identity, he moved a little nearer the road.

CHAPTER II

THE ACCIDENT

THE roar of the car climbing the hill announced its approach, then just as the bonnet came into view over the crest there was a sudden movement behind Shortland and the bunch of ponies that he had before observed plunged across the road. The most of them cleared it before the car came full into view, but one of the foals, scared as it seemed by something that was quite new to its young experience, stopped dead in the middle of the narrow road, whilst its dam strove to urge it forward. The car, clearing the crest and driven in frantic haste, accelerated sharply, and aware of imminent disaster Shortland shouted a hoarse warning.

“For God’s sake ! Look out !”

The girl became aware of the danger in the same moment. He saw the look of horror that leaped into her eyes at the thought of killing a thing so young and helpless as that which barred her way ; then saw her turn the wheel hurriedly in a frantic effort to avoid the catastrophe. The car swerved sharply towards the heather, half leaving the road. There was a sharp crash as it struck a flattish boulder, moss grown and half-hidden in the long tussock, a tearing sound followed, a sharp feminine cry and a splintering of glass as the driver was jerked forward to the windscreens.

Shortland was already running towards the car which had come to a standstill with its front axle wedged against the boulder. As he reached it the girl-driver fell back and collapsed on the wheel in a dead faint. Without delay he flung open the door, and standing on the running board lifted her clear of the wheel and broken glass, laying her on the heather whilst he searched for possible injuries. There was a slight cut above the right ear due to a flying splinter, and her gloved left hand was bleeding rather freely, a clean cut in the leather driving-gauntlet indicating that it must have been in contact with the shattered windscreen. So far as he could ascertain there was no other injury. Swiftly and methodically he stripped the hand and saw that there was a bad cut in the palm extending up the ring finger on which was a half-hoop of diamonds. Slipping the ring off to facilitate operations, he proceeded to bind the wound with his handkerchief. Whilst he was so engaged the girl revived and opened her eyes. A look of wonder came in them. Then a swift light of comprehension.

“Oh!” she sobbed. “That poor little creature.”

“You need not worry about the foal,” laughed Shortland. “It lives to play another day. The near chance was yours, and——”

The girl sat up suddenly.

“My car——” she cried and stopped.

“Haven’t examined it yet, having been engaged in repairing human damages.”

The girl looked at her bound hand, and stretched

her fingers as if to ascertain the extent of her injury.

"Better not do that," continued Shortland. "Any movement will increase the blood flow."

"I cut myself on the glass, I suppose?" said the girl.

"Yes, a rather nasty gash on the palm and ring finger. Oh! I was forgetting. This is yours. I had to take it off in order to bind the cut."

He produced the ring as he spoke and offered it to her. She did not immediately receive it.

"You had to take it off?" she said in a curious tone.

"Yes! It was the only way. And I fancy you will not be able to wear it for a little time, at any rate."

A look of distaste came on the girl's white face.

"I am not sure that I shall ever wear it again," she said impulsively.

Shortland could not hide the wonder he felt. It shone in his grey eyes as they met her hazel ones, and as the blood surged in her white face he forced himself to laugh to cover her manifest confusion.

"There may be someone who will persuade you to a different mind——"

"No, he——" The girl broke off in some embarrassment, then a look of extreme trouble came in her eyes. "My car!" she said abruptly. "Is it drivable? It is most urgent that I should get away. I . . . I mean that I should deliver an important message at the earliest possible moment."

Guy Shortland marked the break in what she had been about to say, but gave no sign. That she was gravely concerned was clear to him, but he made no attempt to force her confidence.

"I will see," he answered, and moving to the car examined it carefully.

The rock which had checked it was wedged against the front axle between the wheels, the front number plate had been snapped right off; but so far as he could see there was no material damage, and it might be possible to back the car off. He explained the situation, and then asked: "I have your permission to make the attempt?"

"Of course! But do please be careful. The hill behind is steep."

He laughed as he climbed into the car and set the engine going. Then putting the gear into reverse he released the clutch and accelerated lightly. From beneath there came a rasping sound and the car moved a little, then the engine stopped as if there had been a heavy application of the brakes. He tried again, accelerating heavily, and with more rasping and a sharp jerk the car moved clear of the obstruction. On the girl's face there came a look of immense relief.

"Oh," she cried, "how grateful I am——"

"Wait!" he said. "You may not be out of the wood yet. I will try the car up the road."

"Please do," answered the girl. "Though it is selfish of me to let you take the risks."

"Risks!" he laughed. "Pooh! There are none."

He put the gear forward, and that done moved cautiously towards the highway, then turned in the direction of Princetown and ran some three hundred yards or so, changing gears as he went. Then on a level patch of turf he reversed, and drove the car back at a rattling pace.

"All serene," he reported, as he descended. "You are lucky."

"Lucky!" With a swift involuntary movement she turned her head in the direction of the house which she had left in such haste, and watching her closely he saw a look of stark terror leap in the hazel eyes. Then she added in a shaking voice: "No! You are wrong. I am most unlucky."

Guy Shortland was greatly moved by her apparent fear and undisguised distress. A desire to serve her surged within him overpoweringly.

"Won't you tell me——" he began, broke off and then added, eagerly: "Let me help you. I am sure there is something——"

"No! No!" she interrupted in something very like panic. "There is nothing. I must go. I do not know how to thank you for all you have done for me. But you will forgive my shortcoming in that way——"

"Please! Please," he said protestingly. "I am only too happy to be of help to you. And if I can any way serve you further——"

"It is impossible," she said brokenly, and stepped into the car, crashing the door behind her; but as she seated herself at the wheel for one moment the hazel eyes strayed towards him appealingly as if asking for his forbearance in a situation that was liable to misunderstanding.

That appeal went to Guy Shortland's heart. That she was somehow involved in great trouble he was convinced, and with a thought that once the car moved forward it would carry her clean out of his life he made one more attempt to maintain the acquaintance.

"I am not sure you ought to go alone. You have suffered a shock, and with that injured hand you may find driving a little difficult. Hadn't you better let me take charge——"

"No! No!" she cried. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself and the car. . . . I—I will show you."

She did. The car moved forward, she changed gears, accelerated a little, then over her shoulder cried back to him:

"There! You see!"

She did not check the car. It gathered speed and began to slip away, whilst Shortland stood there wondering if she meant to return. Quarter of a minute later he knew that she had no such intention. She lifted the bandaged hand in what was clearly a gesture of farewell, and the car swept forward at an increased pace. He stood watching it until it disappeared over an undulation of the moorland

road, then turned slowly away, a look of disappointment on his face, and with an uneasy feeling of concern quickening in his heart.

What was the meaning of the incidents which he had witnessed? Why had that man posed as an artist at the corner of the wire fence surrounding that solitary house? Why had these two men entered the grounds surreptitiously, whilst the other had taken the way through the gate? Why had they sought to hide themselves on the appearance of the blue car, and why had his own presence proved so startling to the Frenchman who had answered his challenge in so drastic a fashion?

Other questions surged on the heels of those relating to the trio who had fled up the road towards Princeton—questions appertaining to the girl, whose rarely beautiful face, white with extreme fear and quick with appeal, came to him in vision as he thought of her. Why had she fled in what was apparently a very tumult of fear from that house across the valley? What had so startled her that she had been oblivious of everything except the necessity of getting away? And again why had she been so firm in refusing his offer to drive the car for her, when most obviously she was very much shaken by the mishap occasioned by the foal?

As the questions passed through his mind at the gallop he turned to look anew at the house set in this solitude of the great moor. As he did so a new thought occurred to him. From first to last he

had seen nothing of any occupant of the house. He had not seen any of the three men enter, though presumably one or all of them had done so; but the girl had passed the door without anyone to greet her and had emerged almost immediately in a shaken condition as if she had suffered some stark experience, and there had been no sign of anyone following her as she fled.

The strange sequence of events had an ominous look. The more he considered them the firmer became his conviction that something sinister had befallen in that house half-screened by the tapering firs, and looking so utterly serene in the autumn sunlight. With fascinated eyes he continued to stare at the silent house, meditating his course of action, then abruptly he began to walk down the slope of the hill, making for the white gate, which in her flight the girl had left wide open.

It took him a full six minutes to reach it, and when he did so he halted again, hesitating a little at the thought of intruding on private property. But the considerations which had brought him so far made it imperative that he should ascertain whether or not there was solid ground for his suspicions, and a remembrance that an inquiry as to his whereabouts would be a sufficient excuse for a call at the house decided him. Passing through the gate he began to make his way up the roughly gravelled drive.

He had proceeded half-way to the house when the sight of something lying on the gravel brought him

to a sharp halt. It was a sealed envelope, quite clean, but badly crumpled, as if the hand that had borne it had been clenched upon it in some stressing emotion. Smoothing it out he considered it carefully. It bore no name or address, but written in red ink in block letters was a single word—

“URGENT.”

To his mind, already hot with formless suspicions, that word in the colour that signified danger loomed portentous, the more so since it was clear that the envelope had not been opened. Whatever message it contained, and by whomsoever's hand it had been brought here and dropped, it was certain that it had not been delivered to, or read by, the person for whom it was intended. The firmly closed flap, and the hard sealing wax, cracked by the force of the clutch that had crumpled the envelope, were indisputable evidence of those facts.

Had the man whom he had seen enter the gate brought it; or had the girl been the messenger, and was it the reason for her call at this house which, set in the stillness of the great moor, seemed more silent than the grave? He thought the latter was the more probable alternative, and after a little further consideration he thrust the envelope in his pocket and continued on his way.

When he reached the terrace he scrutinised the house carefully. The curtained lattices were vacant. One of them which stood open to admit the mellow air and sunlight gave him a glimpse of a room lined

with books, but afforded no indication of any occupant. The door towards which he moved stood wide open as it had done when the girl had entered, and in the stone door-post gleamed an electric bell-push. Mounting the steps, mechanically he set a thumb to the bell-push, whilst he stared curiously into the hall beyond the door. A bluish grey wisp floating through a doorway within caught his eye. He stared at it fascinated for a second or two before a pungent odour of burning wood afforded the explanation. That room was afire. A cold thrill prickled his skin to goose flesh as he realised the truth, then his thumb pressed heavily on the bell-push, and from somewhere in the silent house came a clamorous response which seemed sufficient to wake the dead.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN IN THE CHAIR

THE harsh whirring summons of the bell brought no answer. He waited a moment then tried again, with the same result. A third time he pressed the button, keeping his thumb upon it continuously and filling the whole house with jarring sound. Still there was no response. Either the house was deserted or the owner was stone deaf, or——

He did not complete the thought. Another wisp of smoke, heavier than the one he had previously observed, curling outward to the hall accompanied by a choking smell of burning stuff, decided him. Following the girl's example he stepped into the hall; there hesitated again for a second or two, then moved swiftly towards the door from which the odorous smoke emerged. It stood a little ajar, and as he reached it a sharp crackling sound came to his ears. He thrust the door wide, but at first could see nothing for the smoke which veiled the room, the pungency of which made him cough and stung his eyes to tears. Hastily dashing the moisture away, he stooped low in an endeavour to peer below the smoke cloud which now was fairly billowing through the open doorway.

His effort was rewarded by a glimpse of blue and yellow flame which seemed to rise from heaped up

stuff in front of the hearth, and which spread in a fiery fringe half-way across the room. More he could not see, and it was impossible for him to judge to what extent the fire had taken hold of the room, though a renewed crackling that could only be made by burning wood seemed to indicate that the floor itself was alight. To plunge into that thick smoke was to invite asphyxiation, and since to extinguish the fire was a necessary preliminary to any examination of the room, he ran towards the rear of the house seeking for means to that end.

In the back premises he found a patent pump, with a bucket standing under the spout, and a tap evidently used to draw the water from some cistern into which the water was pumped. If it were full——He set the bucket under the tap and turned the latter. The force of the water as it came forth told him that the cistern was well charged, and whilst the bucket was filling he looked hastily round for some other vessel in which a useful quantity of water might be borne. A small zinc bath hanging from a hook on the wall offered itself, and lifting it down he ran hurriedly back to the tap, substituted the bath for the now brimming bucket, hastened with the latter to the burning room, and venturing a yard or so inside the door, flung the water in the direction of the conflagration. A hissing sound and a cloud of smoke told him that the water had found its mark, and running back he lifted the half-filled bath and setting the bucket in its place once more returned to the burning room.

He repeated the process a dozen times before he had the assurance that he was gaining the upper hand, and then utterly weary, and his legs all drenched with water slopped from the clumsy vessels which he had used, he worked with greater deliberation, entering the room and directing the water at any point where a red glow or an orange flame manifested itself. At last he was sure that the fire was quite extinguished ; and with eyes smarting and still unable to see clearly for the smoke and vapour which filled the room, he felt his way to the window, and throwing open the lattice stood waiting for the room to clear, panting with his exertions and fairly gulping the fresh air as it streamed in.

For perhaps three minutes he stood with his face to the lattice, and at the end of that time, wiping the tears from his smoke-reddened eyes, he turned and looked down the long room. There was still a good deal of smoke about, especially at the far end of the apartment, beyond the door and out of reach of the current of air streaming between it and the window ; and growing impatient he moved forward to begin his exploration. An overturned chair was the first thing to catch his eyes, then he marked a blackened heap of half-burned combustibles, a single glance at which told him that whoever might chance to be the guilty person, the fire was a case of arson.

He passed on towards the smoke-veiled recesses, saw a flower vase on a table tipped over and shattered,

the water still dribbling to the carpet, then noted a large winged grandfather's chair, of which from the angle of his approach he had only a side view. Almost in the same second he marked the lower halves of a pair of legs—the other portions of which were hidden by the body of the chair. For a second or two after the discovery he stood quite still, then moved sharply to obtain a front view, stooping a little the better to see through the veiling smoke. As he did so he suffered a tremendous shock, for seated in the chair, bolt upright, was a man whose wide open eyes gazing from a smoke-blackened face seemed to be fixed upon him in an unwinking stare, as if challenging his presence in that silent house.

CHAPTER IV

A SECOND MEETING

GUY SHORTLAND'S first thought was that the man in the chair was dead ; that those eyes with their stony gaze were those of a man suddenly wrenched to death and left seated there to stare forth with all the semblance of life. But a second later he realised that the eyes were not the eyes of the dead, they were not glazed nor filmy, there was living light in them, and before he could speak or move a flash of surprise kindled in their depths. Then the man stirred, and with some effort spoke.

“ Who . . . are . . . you ? ”

Shortland gave his name, and the man nodded.

“ I have heard of you . . . read a book—— ”

He broke off, and with reviving energy demanded : “ You are not standing in with those three rascals ? ”

Guy Shortland had no doubt that the men so described were the three whom he had seen approach the house, and answered accordingly :

“ If you mean the trio I saw—no ! ”

The man nodded again. “ I needn’t have asked. . . . Tell me what happened. . . . But stay . . . if you don’t mind—first have a look at my head. I have a fancy—— ” He left the words unfinished, and lifted a hand to the right side of his head, the side farthest from Shortland. As he touched it he

wincing, and then lowering the hand he looked at it. As Shortland saw, his fingers were stained with blood. An odd look came on the man's face.

"I wonder if they got me—after all," he remarked coolly. "I don't feel too bad. . . . Just look and see if there's any sign of a bullet, will you?"

Shortland, amazed, almost jumped at the words; then he moved forward and made an examination of the man's head. After a minute he announced the result.

"There's a raw groove several inches long. I saw a man hurt the same way in the war. I should say a bullet——"

"It was a bullet!" interrupted the other brusquely. "It was fired by that scoundrel André from a patent gun he carried, and which looked like a walking-cane."

"It was a mahl-stick, I think," said Shortland, "the sort of thing used by artists, you know."

"Is the wound deep?"

"Nothing to speak of—the bone is not damaged. A few inches of sticking plaster——"

"There's none in the house," broke in the other. "But if you will look in the left drawer of the side-board there you will find some table napkins. You could turn one of them into a bandage—oh! And I say, if you don't mind, you might give me a drink. There's whisky there and a syphon."

Guy Shortland, wondering at the man's coolness in such extraordinary circumstances, served him as desired, following which the man repeated his request.

"Now, if you'll oblige. Tell me what happened?"

Succinctly, Shortland gave him an account of the things he had witnessed; and the man listened intently, breaking in with a comment now and then.

"Fellow painting, hey? That would be André. He has rather a gift that way. But he was just watching this house, you think?"

"I am sure of it!"

"So am I. . . . What followed?"

Shortland continued his narrative, and when he described how he himself had been knocked down the other spoke again.

"You were lucky to get off so lightly. Victor André is a killer—regular apache. But you said there was another car coming up the valley. Did it come here? Did you see who was in it?"

"Yes—to both questions. The driver was a girl—"

"A girl!" For the first time the man exhibited concern. A flame of apprehension kindled in his eyes, and he leaned forward in his chair demanding hoarsely: "Did these fellows see her—speak to her?"

"No! At least they may have seen her, but it was at such a distance they could not possibly recognise her."

"You are sure?" demanded the other.

"Quite sure. When she entered the house they must have been at least a mile on the way to Princetown."

With manifest relief the man sank back in his chair and spoke tersely.

"Continue. She entered the house?"

"Yes. I saw her. She rang, and after waiting, passed inside. She was here a very little while, then she came out—in a panic. She must have seen you, I think, and probably thought you were dead. Whether she realised the room was on fire or not——"

"Poor little Sybil," the man's voice shook with emotion. "It must have been a bad shock to her, seeing me as I was—unconscious. . . . I wonder what brought her?"

Guy Shortland suddenly remembered the envelope he had picked up, and produced it.

"This may explain—possibly. I don't know. I picked it up in the drive as I came here. The girl may have dropped it."

The man took it, looked at the red-lettered word on the outside, then nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Don't mind my opening it? It may have news of importance."

He thrust a thumb under the flap of the envelope, and having opened it took out a folded half-sheet of notepaper, in which were folded two or three flimsy sheets with cuttings pasted on them. One of them slipped from his hand and fell to the carpet, whence Shortland promptly retrieved it, noticing as he did so that it was a long Press cutting made by a well-known agency. He handed it to the man, who read it, and then passed to the consideration of the other cuttings. When he had finished he nodded.

"Stale news this hour or so! Those three rascals put it out of date." He looked at Shortland's face

on which a quite natural curiosity was displayed, and asked :

“ Care to look at them ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t know. I shouldn’t like to poke my nose into your private affairs——”

“ Read ‘em,” said the other, thrusting them forward. “ They’ll tell you a little about those three fellows.”

A trifle reluctantly and blaming himself for having so openly manifested his curiosity, Shortland took the papers and began to read.

As he had already noted they were newspaper cuttings supplied by a Press cutting agency to which he himself subscribed, and were snipped from well-known Australian papers. The first, which was from a Sydney publication and dated nine weeks before, was typical of all three. He read it with quickening interest.

RELEASE OF NOTORIOUS BUSHRANGERS.

“ On Monday last, the 15th inst., three notorious convicts were set at liberty after serving the full term of twenty years imprisonment to which they were sentenced after a trial which lasted five days, and which at the time aroused intense interest in Queensland and, indeed, throughout the whole Commonwealth. The three men—Victor André, Henry Soulsby and James Callaghan, alias Dandy Jim—were concerned with a fourth man in a bushranging affair at Wallaby Hill, a small camp of prospectors being held up by them, and some-

thing like three thousand pounds worth of raw gold stolen by the trio, with the aid of the fourth man who appears to have been the leader in the affair.

" This man, known as Warrego Dan, was unquestionably the biggest desperado of them all, being as it was stated at the time responsible for the shooting of two of the prospectors, who naturally resented being robbed of their hard-won wealth, and one of whom subsequently died. Unfortunately, this villain, when the round-up took place, managed to evade capture, and disappeared, taking the gold with him, robbing his fellow criminals as they had robbed the unlucky prospectors, and nothing has been heard of him since.

" The trio were fortunate to escape hanging for their share in the black business, but they showed little appreciation of the fact, for on sentence being pronounced, one of them before leaving the dock openly threatened, first the leader who had left them in the lurch and, secondly, the three officers who had so brilliantly affected their arrest ; two of whom are now dead, whilst the third is settled in England. . . . It is a testimony to the changed times and to the efficiency and vigilance of the uniformed representatives of the law, that for many years there has been no similar case of organised robbery under arms in the whole wide area of the Commonwealth, and we may safely hope that the old wild days are gone for ever."

As he finished reading, Guy Shortland looked up, a question in his eyes. The other nodded his bandaged head.

"Yes," he said. "Those are the three men mentioned there—a desperate lot."

"So I should say," replied Shortland, and looked at the slip again. "But why should they attack you?"

"Well," replied the other slowly, "I should have thought that was pretty clear from what you have read. That fellow André meant what he said when he made those threats in court, and he's the sort of fellow to go on hating till he dies."

"Then you are——"

Shortland hesitated. There were two men to whom Victor André's threats might still apply—the surviving officer and the man known as Warrego Dan. Which was the man before him to be identified with?

The other saw his dilemma and broke into rallying laughter.

"Do I look like a bushranger?"

Shortland flushed a little, and hurried to reply, apologetically.

"No, of course not! It was stupid of me to hesitate like that. . . . You will, I suppose, at once put the police on the track of those villains?"

The man in the chair considered a moment, then he shook his head and answered slowly.

"I think not. . . . You see those rascals think they have finished me, and from what you say

by this time they will think that I am cremated as well—as I should have been but for you, Mr. Shortland. In their eyes I am dead, and that gives me a long start of them—as you'll see; so I propose to remain dead until I have squared accounts with them. They'll be wary of the official police, but they'll never look for a dead man to trail them, and it will add a little spice of excitement to my . . . er . . . retirement."

He laughed as he spoke, but there was a harsh note in his mirth that was a threat to the three men who had tried to destroy him. A moment later he spoke again.

"I wonder if you would help me in a little thing?"

"Anything I can do—"

"It is quite simple. I gather you can drive a car. I want to leave this house unnoticed, and just as quick as I can—disappear you know. I have a car, but the man who drives it for me is away, having gone to see his sick mother at Over Stowey in Somerset. If you have time and can run me to Plymouth I should be infinitely obliged."

"With pleasure, Mr. . . . er—"

"Harlowe—David Harlowe," filled in the other promptly. He rose a little gingerly from the chair, stood for a moment as if not quite sure of himself, then laughed. "A bit shaky, but nothing to mention." He felt in his pocket and produced a bunch of keys. "That Reo key is the one. The garage is at the back of the house. You might fill up the tank of the car. There is plenty of petrol

about. . . . By the time you bring the car round I shall be ready."

Shortland took the keys and made his way to the garage. There he found a coupé of a well-known make, and having filled the tank and seen that the car was oiled and watered, he moved to the garage door, and for a moment stared absently across the moor, considering events. They had followed each other so rapidly that he had been afforded little time for reflection, and they had been of such amazing character that even now it seemed incredible that they could have happened in this quiet place.

Murder and arson had been attempted ; he himself had suffered a brutal attack ; and the three ruffians, the man whom they had tried to kill, and the girl who had brought what was manifestly a warning were all linked in a mystery that had all the elements of sheer melodrama, into which he himself had been drawn almost willy-nilly. What was the denouement to which it moved ? That man in the house was plainly a man of iron resolution. He had, it seemed, no idea of going to the police, but proposed to conduct some sort of wild vendetta from behind the screen of his supposed death. Was it wise to associate himself with such an affair. "Wise !" he ejaculated, and recalling the girl, laughed softly, conscious of a little thrill of excitement. "If she is in the business. . . ."

He laughed again. His resolution was taken. For once he would live dangerously. He backed the car out, locked the garage door, and ran the

vehicle to the front of the house. Harlowe came to the door, muffled to the ears in a great coat, with a wide-brimmed Stetson concealing the bandage round his head, and carrying a small suitcase. He placed the latter in the car, took his keys, then said : " Just run the car to the road. I will be with you in five minutes."

A little mystified by the request, Shortland carried out the instruction ; and, outside the gate, waited, with the engine shut off. Through the stillness various sounds reached him. He heard a door open, a clanking sound as of tinware followed, then the door crashed, and for a minute or two there was silence. At the end of that time Harlowe came hurrying down the drive and made the car in a staggering run.

" Off ! " he said with an odd laugh, and as he did so turned to look in the direction of the house.

Shortland caught that look, and as he pressed the starter, followed the other's glance. He could see nothing for the trees, and as the engine began to purr he gave his attention to the gear and a moment later they glided forward. Reaching the highway they took the Princetown Road, and as they gathered speed Shortland, forced to keep his eyes on the road ahead, was conscious that his companion was continually turning round as if he were afraid of pursuit. Thinking to reassure the man, he said :

" I told you—didn't I ?—that those rascals took this road. They're not likely to be behind us. If we meet them it will be because we run into them."

"That's not worrying me," answered the other. "It is something quite different which——" They were just topping a steep ascent as he spoke, and he looked round again. Then he gave a chuckling laugh. "All serene behind," he said. "Let her rip, my friend. The road's clear before you, and she'll do sixty without pressing."

Guy Shortland would have given a good deal to look behind him at that moment, but the car claimed his attention, and the road ahead demanded his eyes. Nevertheless, he was conscious that whatever had caused Harlowe to look so often on the backward road had ceased to exert its influence. Now he watched the road ahead with never a backward glance, and presently he spoke abruptly.

"Mr. Shortland, I want you to keep this business to yourself. If the papers get hold of it they'll ferret things out and spoil my game. Whatever happens—I'm a dead man till I resurrect myself. . . . I can rely on you?"

"Of course."

"And if I should call on you for help——"

"Help?"

"Nothing against the law," answered the other hurriedly. "And I am not thinking of myself when I ask for help. I shan't need it. But one can't be in two places at once, and if those gaol-birds should begin to annoy the young lady whom you saw this morning——"

"There is a possibility of that?" asked Shortland.

"A serious one, I think."

"Then you may count me in," replied the young man quickly.

"Thank you! . . . I can't explain the situation at present. You'll have to take things on trust. All that I can tell you is that just now I am moving in pretty deep waters, and what I need more than anything else is someone on whom I can call in case Sybil is involved."

"But surely these ruffians won't attack a girl?"

"They'd attack their own mothers if they stood in their way. And Sybil might strike them as a means of getting me—if they found out—er—things."

Shortland marked the hesitation in the last phrase, and knew that the man had substituted "things" for something that he had been about to say, but though he was curious he refrained from asking what was an obvious question. Presently Harlowe spoke again.

"You know Harford Lodge, I expect?"

"Yes."

"That is where Sybil lives; with her guardian, Mr. Henry Bayhurst."

"I met him a week or two ago," answered Shortland.

"And didn't like him, hey?" Mr. Harlowe laughed drily. "You give yourself away too easily, young man! But I'm not sure that you're not justified in your attitude. I shouldn't have said so yesterday, but the events of this afternoon have set me thinking."

Shortland flashed a glance of amazement. "But surely Bayhurst can have had nothing to do with that affair at your house?"

"Lord knows!" answered the other man with a shrug, and kept his counsel.

They arrived at Plymouth without any disturbing incident, and having driven Harlowe to an hotel where it appeared that he was known, after a little rest Guy Shortland started on his return journey in a hired car. He had now opportunity for reflection on the lively events into which he had been drawn. In spite of the explanation afforded by the newspaper cuttings which he had seen he found those events sufficiently mystifying, and various questions occurred to him. Who had sent the girl to Harlowe with those Press cuttings? Bayhurst? That seemed likely since the man was her guardian, but in that case why had Harlowe found occasion to revise his opinion of him, such revision being occasioned by the events that had occurred? Did he really suspect Bayhurst of being somehow involved with the three ruffians who had made the attack? His reply to the question had been non-committal, but that shrug had been an expressive one. And again why should Harlowe think it possible that the rascally trio might attempt to get at him through the girl if they found out "things"? What were the things referred to? That Harlowe after all had escaped death and the fiery furnace they had prepared for him? No! There was something more than that. If only that possibility

had been concerned the man would not have shirked putting it into words. What was there behind, and what was the relation between them, if, as he clearly feared, she might be used to get at him ?

Absorbed in these questions, he noticed neither the passage of time, nor the distance covered, until a sudden exclamation of the driver awakened him from his absorption.

“What——”

“A fire by the look of things !” said the man with a jerk of his head to indicate the direction.

Guy Shortland looked swiftly towards the point indicated. Smoke was rolling up from a valley and drifting across the moor, whilst on a little hill two or three figures stood staring at something below.

“Heather afire, perhaps ?” he suggested.

“No,” answered the Jehu, sniffing the air. “Smells different. You can’t mistake a moor fire, sir. The smoke has a scent that’s, well—aromatic ; this is different. It’s wood an’ stuff. There’s a house or something of the sort burning down there——”

“Great Scott !”

The ejaculation was torn from Shortland by a sudden conviction of the truth as he recognised the contours of the moor about him. Where that little knot of people—all women—were standing ; he himself had lain in the heather watching the artist who had not painted. That meant. . . .

“Drive fast !” he snapped to the driver. “Pull up where those women are standing.”

The Jehu accelerated, and the car shot forward. The smoke thickened a little as they approached the little group of women, but the valley was hidden from them by the slope of the land. Yet though he could not see, Guy Shortland had no doubt of the place that was burning, and when the car pulled up he flung himself out and fairly ran to a point that would give him a view of the solitary house which had been the theatre of such intriguing events.

“Knew it!” he ejaculated to himself, as staring across the valley he saw the bungalow was a burning ruin. The roof had fallen in, flames still licked the window frames and the door posts, whilst from within the blackened walls the smoke rose in volumes, with orange tongues of fire breaking through. The place, as the first glimpse told him, was completely gutted, and so far as the house was concerned it was an empty shell.

“But in heaven’s name, how did——”

He did not finish the thought. He was quite sure that he had extinguished the fire started by that ruffianly trio. It could not possibly have revived to destructive life. Some new fire must have been kindled. Had those men returned and——”

“No! by Jove!”

Conviction of the truth came to him with the suddenness of a thunderbolt. He saw himself seated in the car at the gates waiting for Harlowe, heard a door crash, and the rattle of tinware.

“Petrol tins!” he ejaculated.

So that was it. Harlowe had sent him to the gate whilst he fired the house anew. Here was the explanation of the odd expression on his face when he had entered the car and the backward looks from the road. He had desired assurance that the house was alight—

“But in heaven’s name, why?” he whispered to himself.

The explanation leaped to his mind almost immediately. The man was following his plan of letting his enemies think he was a dead man and that the bungalow was his funeral pyre. It seemed a drastic and costly expedient to burn one’s own house down in order to deceive three murderous rascals, but plainly David Harlowe was thorough in his actions, and possibly subscribed to the ancient doctrine: “Skin for skin, all that a man hath will he give for his life.”

He stood there, whistling softly to himself, for a moment or two; then observing a number of people in the neighbourhood of a house, he turned towards the road which crossed the valley and began to make his way in the direction of the burning building. It might, he thought, be as well to discover what view people took of the fire, and whether they held the belief that Harlowe had perished in the flames.

He had gone but a little way when he came on a car with a broken windscreens. He recognised it instantly. It was the one belonging to the girl who had brought the warning to Harlowe a few hours

before. His heart quickened at the sight, and he looked eagerly towards the people near the burning house in the hope that he might discover her. A whirl of smoke obscured his view, but with a feeling of pleasurable anticipation he hurried forward. Luck served him beyond his hope. Halfway down the hill, by a patch of tall gorse bushes, he came suddenly upon a girl watching the fire. Her back was towards him, but he had not the slightest doubt as to her identity, and he made a bee-line towards her. The crackling and roar of the fire drowned the very slight noise his feet made in the short turf ; and he was almost upon her, when, chancing to turn round, she became aware of his approach. He saw swift recognition leap in her eyes. The warm blood flushed her face and then receded, leaving it very pale. She stood there looking the very picture of embarrassment, no doubt thinking of the rather ungracious way in which she had driven off earlier in the day. Divining her feelings, he laughed to reassure her. His hand went to his cap, and as he raised it he greeted her cheerfully.

“ Good evening, Miss Sybil. It seems we are fated to meet in this place.”

As he spoke her name she started. A flash of surprise came in her eyes, but was displaced a second later by a look of utter perturbation. Then she stammered wonderingly :

“ But how . . . who told you . . . my name ? ”

CHAPTER V

DISCOVERIES

AS the girl asked her question Guy Shortland recognised his indiscretion. He could not tell her the source of his information without betraying Harlowe's secret, and since he had promised to guard that he was forced to fence with the question.

"Harford Lodge is not exactly a bushel to hide a candle," he laughed, "rather it is a candlestick, and the ward of Mr. Henry Bayhurst can scarcely expect to remain unknown on this countryside."

"But you did not know my name when you helped me?"

"No," he answered easily, "but I have learned it since. Gossips are everywhere here, you know."

The implied explanation satisfied her, and after considering the burning house for a moment she turned to him again.

"I ought to thank you for what you did, and to apologise for my rather cavalier departure——"

"Please don't!" he interjected. "I understand."

"You . . . you understand?"

There was a little catch in her voice, and as she spoke a shadow of apprehension darkened the hazel eyes. Again he reassured her.

"I understand that you were in a great hurry. That, believe me, is a sufficient explanation for me."

He gave her no time to comment, and changed the subject.

"That house seems doomed completely. How did the fire start?"

"No one knows," she answered quickly. "It was burning like a torch when a farmer across there observed it, and it is feared that the owner is . . . is destroyed with it."

Her voice quivered as she gave the information, and the trouble in her face was plain. It was clear that the possibility she referred to disturbed her profoundly; and Guy Shortland found himself wondering if after all she had seen Harlowe sitting, apparently dead, in that burning room, or whether something else had occasioned her desperate flight. But, he told himself, there could have been nothing else. She must have looked in that room and have seen the man in the chair, the fire creeping up that mass of combustible stuff. Nothing less than that could explain the panic she had displayed. Yet she dissembled. Why?

He asked himself the question, but he did not put it to her. If she should take him into her confidence, well and good; if not, he would abide his time.

"You knew him?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, the quiver in her voice again, then she cried brokenly in a half whisper: "Oh, I . . . I can't believe he is dead."

Her manifest trouble made Shortland regret his promise to Harlowe. It was an iniquity that she should distress herself for a man who was so much

alive, and he was tempted to tell her the truth. But the remembrance that perhaps Harlowe's life depended on his silence, checked the impulse and forced him to dissimulation.

"Is it certain that he——" He broke off, his eyes on the gutted house, and the girl answered the unfinished question.

"It is almost a certainty. He was in the house—alone. He has not been seen since the fire was discovered."

"You have been over there?" he asked.

"No," she answered with a little shiver.

"But there may be news?" he urged. "It might be worth while to go."

"If I thought so——" she began and broke off.

"Come, Miss Sybil. Let us go together. Something may have turned up to show that what you fear is groundless."

"But if he were in that room——" she checked sharply and corrected herself. "If he were in the house there can be no hope."

Shortland noted the check and the change in her words, and the two told him much. She knew. She had been in that room and had looked on an apparently dead man. Whether in the terror of that moment she had observed the fire that had been started, he could only guess; but her inadvertence left him in no doubt that she had seen Harlowe, had believed him dead, and that there was the reason for her panic flight. But he gave her no indication of his knowledge.

"If he were in the house," he said easily, "and stayed on, certainly there is no hope. But who is to say? . . . Let us go down," he urged. "As I said there may be news that will be reassuring."

"If you think so."

As she spoke she moved forward and Shortland fell into step beside her. A word from him would have lifted the trouble from her, but circumstances forbade that word being spoken, and in silence they went down the hill together and ascended the slope on the further side. Something like a dozen people—a crowd for such a solitude—scattered in groups of twos and threes, were standing in the neighbourhood of the house, watching its destruction. Farm buckets lying about testified to neighbourly attempts to cope with the fire, but, as Shortland recognised, once the fire had taken hold, any effort to extinguish it must have been frustrated by the scarcity of water. As they reached the road in front of the gate two men emerged, and the girl, promptly detaching herself, ran to meet them. Shortland refrained from following her. One of the pair—a clerical looking gentleman of a sleekly benevolent aspect, he recognised for Henry Bayhurst, her guardian; but the other, young, tall, with a handsome face, and dressed for riding was a stranger to him.

He saw the girl reach the two men and address them. Mr. Bayhurst lifted both hands, commiseratingly, and a look of mingled pity and horror came on his face. The younger man took a step forward, planting himself by the girl's side with an air of

proprietorship, which galled the watcher exceedingly, and brought to his mind remembrances of the ring he had taken from the girl's hand a few hours ago. Was this the man who had placed it there, and—

“Good afternoon, Mr. Shortland. This be a real bad business, vor zure, baint it ?”

The speaker was a water bailiff whose acquaintance Shortland had recently made, and recognising his opportunity to learn something that he wished to know he replied promptly.

“Very ! . . . I suppose nothing has been seen of Mr. Harlowe ?”

“Not a hair of en. I guess the poor soul be burned with his house. There don't seem to be the ghost ov a chance that he've got away. An' Mr. Bayhurst there be convinced he be turned to ashes long zince, an' he being a friend of Mr. Harlowe be terr'ble upset.”

“Naturally. It is a tragic thing, if it be so. . . . But I say, Vowler, who are the two young people with Mr. Bayhurst ?”

“The maid be his ward, Miss Lyncourt, zir, an' do live with en down to Harford Lodge, an' the other be Mr. Arthur Stoodley, who be staying along with Mr. Bayhurst just now—a dashing rider an' a vair wondervul man with a gun.”

“Indeed !”

“Iss, zir. Folk do zay he'm from Australia, wi' pots ov money, an' that he be makin' up to Miss Lyncourt.”

“Ah ! Is that so ?”

“I don't know whether it be zo or not, zir, but that

be the gossip, an' to be sure, 'ee can zee 'em traipsing or riding about the moor together most days ov the week."

The man touched his cap and moved on, leaving Guy Shortland to his thoughts, which were not particularly cheerful ones. The information he had just received, though it might be no more than gossip, had set a damper on his spirits. From the first moment of their meeting he had been conscious of an interest in the girl that had nothing to do with the circumstances that had brought them together, and now——

He broke off the thought and whistled lugubriously to himself, from time to time glancing towards the place where the two men stood with the girl. Then as a shower of sparks and a cloud of smoke accompanied by a crash shot up from the burning house, he moved away to get a nearer view of the fire. It was then, from a point of view among the pines, that he saw a figure moving along the hedge-side skirting the grounds and making for the rear of the house. It seemed to him that there was something surreptitious in the man's movements, as if he were anxious to avoid notice, and that fact riveted his interest on the man. Presently he caught a clear glimpse of the man's face and recognised Mr. Arthur Stoodley. What was he after that he should slink up the hedge-side in that secret way?

Scarcely had he asked himself the question when he himself began to work through the trees towards the rear of the burning house. What dictated his action he could not have told, but the issue of it was interesting enough. Reaching a point where the

rear of the house was visible he found it quite deserted, the stable, the outhouses, and the garage quite untouched by the fire. A moment later, however, Mr. Arthur Stoodley slipped from the hedge, and after a swift look round crossed the yard to one of the outhouses where he disappeared. Presently he returned carrying a hammer in one hand and a cold chisel in the other. Making his way to the garage the man began to attack the shuttered window, and watching him, Shortland understood what he was after. Stoodley desired to find out whether Harlowe's car was there or not.

The shutter had been open when Shortland had taken the car out, and he thought to himself that for some reason or other, possibly in anticipation of someone remembering the car, Harlowe must have closed and locked it. He watched the man break away the staple which held the padlock, open the shutter and peer in. A moment later he stood back, staring from the window to the house with an utterly incredulous look upon his face. That he had discovered the car was not there and was something more than puzzled by its absence was clear. Again he peered in, and then looked to an upper window on the same side of the garage, which from the curtains it boasted was probably the living room of the chauffeur.

To Shortland it was plain as print what was in his mind. Finding the car missing had set him thinking of other possibilities than the one that Harlowe had perished in the burning house. He was clearly thinking that the man whom all believed

dead might have taken refuge in that upper room. That was demonstrated when, after standing for a moment or two in thought, he went to the door and began an attack upon it with the hammer and chisel. It took him a little time to force the lock, but presently one-half the double door swung open and the man passed inside. Shortland waited, knowing that whatever the man's search might reveal it would not be the thing that he might be expecting. There was a short flight of steps within, as he had observed when taking out the car. These, no doubt, led to the living room overhead, and whilst he waited he conceived the man mounting them and taking a look round. Keeping his eye on the curtained window he presently saw Mr. Arthur Stoodley's face close to the panes. It disappeared a moment later, and the man reappeared in the yard. He thrust the door to, fastened it with a stone, and then began to go back the way he had come, a frown of perplexity darkening his handsome face.

Guy Shortland wasted no time. He himself returned to the road almost at the double, so quickly in fact that he was there before Stoodley emerged from the grounds. One hasty look round told him that Sybil Lyncourt had gone, and that Mr. Henry Bayhurst was standing alone—waiting no doubt for the reappearance of his guest. Unobtrusively, Shortland edged nearer to him, and when the younger man came hurrying from the gate, was little more than a couple of yards away, near enough to hear Mr. Bayhurst snap sharply :

“ Well ? ”

“ The car has gone ! ”

“ The devil ! ” cried Mr. Bayhurst in astonishment.

“ Yes. That means— ”

What it meant Shortland did not hear, the guarded words being lost in a sudden crackling of the fire, but he distinctly heard the older man’s next words.

“ They may have taken it.”

“ They had a car of their own.”

Shortland half turned and stole a look at the pair. That they were a brace of much puzzled men both countenances showed. Mr. Bayhurst was staring frowningly in the direction of the burning house, whilst the other watched him, the perplexed look still on his face. Then the older man spoke again.

“ But Sybil saw— ” he broke off in evident perplexity and added irritably—“ Damn it, Stoodley, the thing is impossible ! ”

Turning on his heel he began to walk away, his companion following and speaking at the same time. Only a portion of the words reached Shortland, who with straining ears was playing eavesdropper in the most brazen fashion.

“ On the face of things . . . but if those three fools bungled— ”

“ Phew ! ”

Guy Shortland whistled softly to himself as he watched the pair move on. Here was food for thought with a vengeance. Those two men, still deep in discussion, were clearly convinced as to

the origin of the fire, and the last words he had overheard, with the tone in which they had been spoken, seemed to imply that not only were they aware of the call made by the three ex-convicts, but also they were concerned as to the possible failure of their nefarious activities. He recalled Harlowe's cryptic hint about Mr. Bayhurst. Whatever friendship there had been between the men something had awakened distrust in the former, so that he was not quite so sure of the other's friendliness as he would have been twenty-four hours before.

That fact gave an ugly look to the words that he had just overheard. Whatever had stirred Harlowe's distrust, here, it seemed, was corroboration. These two men were concerned less at the thought that Harlowe was dead, than by the possibility that after all he might have escaped the fate designed for him by the three ex-convicts.

On the face of things, such a conclusion might seem absurd. One of them—Bayhurst for a guess—had sent Sybil Lyncourt with the warning newspaper cuttings, but that very fact implied a certain knowledge of the danger in which Harlowe stood ; and the tones in which he had just spoken had been those of a chagrined man, whilst the younger man's last utterance had been almost brutally frank. Weighing things carefully he had an idea that, notwithstanding Mr. Bayhurst's position as the owner of Harford Lodge, and the younger man's reputed wealth, both would bear watching. The more he reflected on the matter the more he was

convinced that in connection with the attack upon the owner of the bungalow there were things that did not meet the eye. What they were he could not even remotely guess, but the problem and the certain mystery behind recent events intrigued him. He thought of them all the way to his temporary home—a furnished house on the edge of the moor, and that very night he had the luck to stumble on confirmation of his idea.

Having run out of cigarettes he walked into Ashburton—a matter of three miles or so—to replenish his stock. Feeling a little tired after his walk he entered an hotel, and in the lounge called for a whisky and soda. Lighting a cigarette, he found a comfortable chair, and was listening to some inane performer through the loud speaker which the hotel provided for the entertainment of its clients, when two men entered the hotel. One of them moved straight forward to the lounge, unmistakably a moorland farmer, but the other halted in the lobby outside, considering as it seemed the contents of the letter rack, which consisted of one letter and a telegram. The man's back was towards him, but Shortland saw him start as he bent forward to read the addresses, and what followed interested him much. The man straightened himself and looked round furtively as if to make sure that his actions were unobserved. Then he stretched a hand towards the rack in the direction of the letter, to which, as his whole manner proclaimed, he had no right. But the sound of an opening door somewhere in the

passage checked the man's thievish design. The hand dropped, and with the utmost nonchalance the fellow turned and pushing the door wide entered the lounge.

As he saw his face clearly Shortland had a surprise, for the man was the one who had kicked him so brutally after he had been knocked down by the Frenchman in the car. Would the recognition be mutual, and in that event what course should he pursue? As he asked himself the question, the newcomer glanced casually round. The farmer had joined two cronies in a corner by the fire, and the man's eyes went first to them, examining them with a closeness that could not have been dictated by mere curiosity. Shortland made use of the opportunity afforded by the brief interval to pick up a newspaper, and was busily pretending to read it when the man's attention was transferred to him. He did not lift his eyes, though very conscious of the other's scrutiny, and it was not until the man gave an order to a waitress that he ventured to look at him. Apparently the fellow had not recognised him. He drew a breath of relief, and, over the newspaper, considered the man closely. He was a tall loosely built man of perhaps forty-five, with greying hair, hard steel-blue eyes, and a lean clean-shaven face, the most noticeable feature of which were the hawk-like nose and the straight, thin-lipped mouth. A ruthless fellow, thought Shortland to himself, and quite capable of any wild deed.

But what was he doing here, and what was the letter in the rack outside which had so interested

him that he had come near to stealing it? Scarcely had he asked himself the question when it was answered, at least in part. There was a sound of steps in the hall, and in the same moment the proprietor of the hotel emerged from the bar.

"Hello! Mr. Stoodley. Glad to see you back again."

The newcomer, still invisible from the lounge, laughed. "Sorry to disappoint you, Vinniecombe. I've just drifted along for any letters that may have been sent here."

"There's one—in the rack. Came this morning."

"Oh, thanks."

A second later Arthur Stoodley came into view and took down the letter from the rack. Opening it, he stood in full sight of the lounge reading it; and whilst he did so, Shortland flashed a glance in the direction of the man who had designed to appropriate that letter. The man's lean face had a tense look. His steel-blue eyes were fixed on Stoodley in an appraising stare. It was clear that he was deeply interested in him, though in what that interest was rooted Shortland had not the remotest idea. Further food for thought was afforded him a minute later, when Stoodley entered the lounge, and it was demonstrated that whatever interest the stranger might have in Stoodley, the latter did not reciprocate the interest, from which the watcher deduced that the pair were really unacquainted with each other.

Stoodley seated himself, called for whisky, invited the landlord to join him, and as the latter did so

conversed affably with him. Every word was clear to anyone in the room who was disposed to listen, and Guy Shortland listened deliberately, watching the ex-convict over the paper, aware that the latter, seated sideways, staring at the fire, was listening, as the phrase goes, with all his ears. For a time the conversation was desultory—the weather, the late harvest, the abundance of snipe on the moor, then came words which visibly quickened the interest of the man by the fire.

“Nice place Mr. Bayhurst has got up at Harford. A bit lonely, but good for the shooting an’ the fishing.”

Stoodley laughed. “Yes; but it is wasted on him, for he neither shoots, nor hunts, nor fishes.”

The landlord laughed. “So I’ve heard; and it’s queer that, for a man who has lived so much abroad—Australia, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Stoodley.

“Same country as you happen to come from, sir. I suppose you and Mr. Bayhurst are old friends?”

Guy Shortland did not hear the reply. All his interest was centred in the other man by the fire, who at the mention of Australia had started and half-turned round in his chair to throw a piercing glance in the direction of the two. That his interest was in Arthur Stoodley, and not in the landlord, Shortland did not question for a moment; and a little later, when the former drank up his whisky and stood up to depart, he was trebly assured of the fact, for the man by the fire rose suddenly and

abruptly left the room. Stoodley himself lingered a minute or two longer giving instruction about the retention of a room that apparently he had engaged, then with a genial good-night took his departure.

Guy Shortland remained where he was for perhaps twenty seconds, then anxious to prove an idea that had occurred to him he followed Stoodley. In the street he looked hastily both ways, and a little distance away saw the man's tall figure pass a lighted window, going along the Plymouth road. Half a minute later a second figure crossed the same zone of light—that of the ex-convict—who quite clearly was on the trail of the man ahead.

He chuckled at this confirmation of his suspicion, and after waiting a full two minutes set out to shadow the shadower, wondering what the latter's interest was in Arthur Stoodley, and a little relieved to find that the way taken was his own homeward way. He followed cautiously, anxious to avoid drawing the attention of the ex-convict to himself. In the town there was no difficulty in that ; but when the outskirts were left behind, and the pair ahead turned into the Holne and Princetown road, it was not quite so easy, for it was difficult to avoid making a noise in the lane-like road, which was very solitary and full of shadows. A three-quarter moon was climbing in the sky, but it was of little use in the road, accentuating rather than dispersing the shadows ; and having for precautionary reasons fallen further behind, he lost sight of the two men in front altogether.

That, however, troubled him little. One of the pair, Stoodley, as he guessed, whistled a lively quick-step to which he no doubt marched, and with that in his ears Shortland knew that he would not lose the two men. On the pair went, and presently were going down the hill to Holne bridge. The moon, climbing higher, lit the tops of the trees in the Chase, but the road itself continued in shadow, and when the bridge was crossed and they were under the trees it was almost pitch dark. By this time Stoodley had ceased to whistle, and though Shortland stopped to listen, no sound of footsteps reached him, all smaller noises being swallowed up in the unceasing babble and ripple of the Dart hurrying to the sea.

He had no doubt, however, that both men were swinging on their way ahead of him, since if Stoodley were going to Harford Lodge—as almost certainly he was—he must cross the next bridge over the river before he could make any turn. Ascending the hill, they left the river for a time, and though the distant rush of water filled the night with a rumbling sound, it was possible now to hear an occasional footfall, and once or twice when the moonlight broke through the trees he was afforded glimpses of the pair he followed. He saw them quite clearly on the second bridge, and on the flat beyond, first one and then the other, and he himself waited until both had taken the steep turn which led up the hill to Poundsgate.

There he almost over-ran his quarry, for as he made the turn which brought him to the inn which

the hamlet boasts he stumbled against a man who was loitering in the shadows round the corner. It was the ex-convict, as he recognised at once, and instantly he thought that the man had become aware that he himself was being shadowed. But scarcely was the thought shaped when the convict himself reassured him.

“Curse you, fool! Look where you are going.”

Shortland could have laughed with relief, as it was, throwing a country burr into his voice, he answered apologetically:

“Zorry, zir.”

There was, he thought, only one course to follow, and that was to turn into the inn, where as he guessed, Stoodley had called for refreshment. He did so without hesitation, taking the risk of being observed by Stoodley himself, and as he entered had the surprise of his life; for seated by the fire in the tap-room, with Stoodley standing with a glass tankard of ale in his hand, were the two companions of the man outside.

Knowing that if he entered the room the Frenchman at any rate would almost certainly recognise him, he called for a bottle of beer and drank it in the lobby, meaning to wait sufficiently long to let Stoodley continue on his way. But whilst he stood there two other men entered the house, labouring men as, without turning round, he judged from the sound of their heavily clouted boots, and then a third man of lighter step. He had no doubt whatever that this was the shadower who, growing tired

of waiting, had decided to have a quencher; and as the man turned into the tap-room he risked a glance over his shoulder to make sure. It was the man who had followed Stoodley all the way from town, and as he stood there he heard him give an order for beer and then join his two fellows by the fireplace. He was on the point of using the chance for withdrawal which was offered when Stoodley himself came out to the passage and passed outside. He followed him swiftly, and making sure that the other was taking the Princetown road he slipped into the deep shadows of overhanging trees and watched the inn door.

He had not long to wait. In no time at all, as it seemed, the rascally trio stumbled out into the road, where the tall man quickly explained something in whispers. Then one of them broke out in an amazed voice.

“But, *mon Dieu!* eet ees imposseeble, Jeem!”

“It’s the truth I’m telling you,” asserted the other angrily. “Bayhurst lives this way somewhere, and that fellow’s name is the same——”

“But he’s twenty years too young, Jim,” objected the other. “The world has moved on since we bust up that miners’ camp at——”

“Fools! I tell you it is so. This fellow’s from Australia. The name is the same; he may be a son. The Lord knows, but one thing is sure—he’s going to Bayhurst’s place, an’ I’m going, too, to find out the truth.”

He wasted no more time in argument but began

to hurry forward. His fellows hesitated, and the Frenchman swore softly.

“Diable ! C'est folie. But we also follow, mon ami, hein ?”

“ Jim's clean crazy, but—— Oh, get on.”

The pair hurried forward in the wake of their friend, and after an interval, more intrigued than ever, Shortland took up the chase anew. If Stoodley were going to Harford Lodge, he would soon leave the main road and no doubt take a track which would lead him straight to the house ; and aware of this he pressed the chase, keeping to the shadowed side of the road. He had no need to go quietly. The two men in front, hurrying up the steep hill, made noise enough to cover any sound he might make. Presently he saw them standing in the moonlight by the signpost that indicated a branch road, and quite distinctly caught the Frenchman's voice.

“ Zere !”

The pair took the side road at a run, and reaching it, Shortland himself turned into the gorse and bracken which flanked it, and keeping to a stone wall on the lower side, hurried forward. The moonlight was now flooding the moor, and quite clearly he could see the two men running along the road, and a third man well ahead, whom he guessed was the man Jim. Stoodley was not in sight. Divining that by this he had probably left the road, he himself climbed the wall on his right and made his way through the trees to the rough pasture beyond. There the moonlight in the open place enabled him

to see a man moving along a field path towards a large house embowered in trees, from the windows of which lights streamed—Harford Lodge. He looked carefully in the wake of the man and saw a second man come into sight, creeping along the bottom of the hedge bank. Assured that the pursuit was to go on to the end, he made for another hedge on the right, reached it, and then sprinted across the field below. As he ran he caught the clash of an iron gate, and knew that Stoodley at any rate had passed into the Lodge grounds. He himself did not trouble to find the gate. Encountering a wire fence he slipped between the wires into the trees beyond, and then cautiously began to make his way in the direction of the house.

He had not gone very far when he came on a stretch of park-like land dotted here and there with conifers and cedars, full in the eye of the moon, with the Lodge itself on the further side. Halting in the shadow of the trees he watched the open space and saw Stoodley's tall form pass across the grass and enter the house, and as he stood there wondering what had become of the three men following him, a dog barked sharply on his right, a very little distance away, and then a girl's laughing voice cried reprovingly :

“Terry! Terry! come here. Leave the bunnies alone.”

He had no doubt who the speaker was, and as he stood there in the shadows he saw her walking in the moonlight, the dog running ahead. Watching her moving towards him, and remembering the

three men in the wood behind, he was in something of a quandary. To remain there was to risk discovery, and possibly to fall under unjust suspicion ; whilst to go away was to leave the girl at the mercy of three men who were capable of any desperate action.

The latter consideration decided him. He remained where he was, watching the girl's approach, and listening for any indication of the men in the wood behind. He caught the sound of a slight movement ; but decided that it was a rabbit or some small creature of the night, and as he did so his attention was called to the dog, a rough-haired terrier, which, nosing the ground, came to a sharp halt scarcely half a dozen yards from him. It growled menacingly, and then broke into a quick, hostile bark. The girl ran forward, crying as she ran :

“Terry ! Terry !”

She drew nearer. He saw her uncovered hair gleam in the moonlight, glimpsed a white neck only half hidden by the fur collar of a loose coat ; and then the dog, barking vociferously, rushed towards him, halting less than a yard away, drawing the girl's eyes straight to him.

“Who are you ?” she asked, a little quiver in her voice. “What are you doing here ?”

“Miss Lyncourt,” he answered urgently, “go back to the house. Don't linger here. Go——”

“Oh-h ! You are——”

“Go ! At once ! I will explain another time.”

“But——”

"Believe me, Miss Lyncourt, the matter is urgent. . . . The men who fired the bungalow this afternoon are in the neighbourhood. Don't wait go!"

Impressed by his earnestness the girl wasted no time in further questions. She called off the terrier in a peremptory voice and began to make a bee-line for the house, quickening her pace as she left the wood behind, and presently breaking into a run. Guy Shortland waited until she reached the open door of the Lodge, then he turned to make his way back to the road. As he did so he heard a voice ejaculate distinctly.

"Now! get the blighter!"

A stick snapped close at hand. He was aware of a man on his right rushing towards him, already less than three yards away. Sounds of others crashing through the undergrowth came from his left, and he had no doubt that the others were coming that way. He began to run, and the man on the right twisted sharply to intercept him. Shortland did not try to avoid him. The man revealed himself by a single word.

"*Halte!*"

It was the man Victor, who had struck so ruthlessly when he had challenged him. That knowledge lent weight to the rushing blow he delivered as he ran forward. The Frenchman went down under it as if hit by a battering ram, and leaping over him Shortland ran through the shadows for dear life, conscious of the pounding of pursuing feet behind him.

CHAPTER VI

PURSUED

HE had but a short start, but being well acquainted with the ground he made good use of it and drew ahead of his pursuers, aiming for a point below the hamlet, meaning to get across the river and make for his own house. He had ill-luck, however. A trailing root brought him heavily to the ground, and by the time he had recovered from the shock and picked himself up the pursuit had gained considerably. The three men were running in a wide line, one making for the lower side in the direction of the river, a second running on higher ground towards the road, whilst the third was coming on behind at a rattling pace.

For the moment, as a swift glance to right and left told him, the two men running above and below him were straining themselves to get between him and the river on the one hand and to shut him from the road on the other, leaving it to the third man to follow him in a straight line. That sooner or later, when they were in position to intercept him either way, they would close on him, he was assured ; and as he ran his mind worked rapidly, seeking the way by which he could frustrate their obvious intention. He was out of the zone of the trees, running, full in the moonlight, across rough pasture land, grown here and there with gorse and

bracken, which was too short to offer concealment. Speed alone, it appeared, could save him ; and shaken as he had been by the fall, he was by no means a match for the man coming up behind.

He ran on, however, hoping some chance would serve him. Dark forms lying on the turf immediately in front woke into sudden life, lifting themselves to their feet and whinnying in a frightened way—a drove of forest ponies. He gave a wild shout as he ran towards them. The ponies, scared by his appearance and his yell, broke and ran in a dozen directions, leaving the way in front of him clear, but momentarily blocking the way of his immediate pursuer. Almost in the same moment a long crenulated ridge of rocks appeared in front of him, gaunt and grim in the moonlight. He knew that ridge well, having often admired it from below, and on the lower side as he knew was a long drop which would mean damaged limbs or a broken neck. To clamber down would take time, and his pursuers would run round the outcrop and no doubt await him below. He looked hastily to right and left, noting the position of the two men there. The one below was running parallel with himself, the one on the higher ground had already outstripped him and was closing in.

There was but one hope for him, and that was to find a hiding place among the rocks. It was a forlorn enough chance, but since no better offered he was compelled to take it, and ran straight on towards the ridge. The man below, seeing the way was

barred to him, loosed a yell of triumph and turned up the slope, whilst his fellow above shouted a warning to his fellow running in the direct line.

“ ‘Ware wire, Jim. There’s a big drop in front ! ”

A moment later Shortland reached the first rocks and still ran as if he meant to plunge into the gulf before him. Then he dropped on his knees behind a convenient boulder and began to crawl. The ridge was like the saw-toothed jaw of some enormous prehistoric monster, sharp points jutting up here and there of irregular height, with crevices between. A man might hide there, but would most certainly be discovered if any vigorous search were made. The obvious hiding place was one to avoid ; and as he crawled, he doubled back, making for a small patch of gorse which grew at the edge of the ridge. Just as he reached it he heard the ring of booted feet on stone, and looked hastily round. The man on the lower side was climbing upwards ; the one above was standing staring down to the base of the ridge ; whilst the third man was poking among the rocks where he had dropped out of sight. Shutting his eyes, without the slightest hesitation, he wormed himself into the thick of the gorse clump, scratching himself severely in the process ; but panting and gasping, finally coming to rest in the very heart of it.

There he crouched like a hare in its form, waiting what was to follow. He could see nothing, but his ears informed him that the trio were poking among the rocks searching for him.

"It was here the beggar slid out," shouted one man.

"Well, he ain't here now, Soulsby. He must have crawled among those rocks there. Guess we've got to hustle round."

He heard them hustling, feet scraping among rocks, and an occasional stumble, and once or twice an oath which proclaimed the search was not without its difficulties. Then a voice spoke sharply.

"You stand there, Victor, an' keep a bright lookout, whilst Jim an' I comb these blasted rocks. The fellow is here somewhere an' he may try to make a break."

"Vaire well, *mon ami*."

The rasping feet moved further away, grew distant ; and some minutes passed without anything happening. Lying among the dead gorse prickles, every single one of which seemed to have made a pin-cushion of him, Guy Shortland conceived the two men searching the ridge minutely, with the Frenchman standing still as a statue in the moonlight, but alert as a weasel, watching for the slightest indication of his presence in the neighbourhood. He heard the man strike a match, and a second later the pungent odour of caporal drifted to him in his prickly lair. Then the man laughed softly, and broke out as if an idea had occurred to him.

"*Tiens ! Eef eet should be ! Eet weel be well to make certain.*"

He heard the fellow move, and guessed that he had reached the edge of the gorse. Did he mean

to search it, beat it as beaters do a wood for game ? In that case—— A second later there came a sound which told him the truth—the scraping of a match on a box. He caught a faint crackling, a pungent whiff of dry grass afire, and with a little thrill of fear guessed that the man was trying to kindle the gorse.

For a moment he was tempted to flight. He had heard of a man in a moor fire caught in a patch of the greater gorse and incinerated, and that was a fate too horrible to be contemplated. Then he set his teeth and schooled himself to wait. There was no wind, and without wind to fan the flame and carry it from bush to bush the Frenchman's dastardly plan must fail.

Again there was the scrape and sizzle of a match. Plainly the first attempt had failed to light the gorse, and the man was trying again. The faint crackling followed once more, and as there drifted to him the smoke of dead herbage burning, he saw the flicker of flame among the gorse. He waited breathlessly, tense with anxiety. If after all the flame should spread. . . . To his great relief it spluttered out, and the incendiary spat a chagrined oath :

“Diable !”

But he was not yet done. He tried again, and as for the third time following the striking of the match there came the splutter of flame and a gust of aromatic smoke, the hidden man in turn was moved out of his grim patience.

“ Damn the fellow’s persistence ! ”

The persistence might have achieved its object, but for one thing which moved the fellow to a second oath. What that was became clear to Shortland a moment later when some light thing was tossed into the gorse, hung for a moment on a prickly spray, then dropped almost into his hand. He retrieved it silently, and as his hand closed on it his heart leaped. It was an empty box, and almost certainly the ruffian had come to the end of his matches.

There was a sound of movement—feet rasping on the rock, and with straining ears he tried to follow them. They receded a little, and he asked himself was the man making a tour of the gorse clump in the hope of being able to penetrate it ? A moment later he was reassured on that point. The sounds came directly from the front, and as he realised that hopeful fact they ceased ; and from somewhere down the slope a chagrined voice shouted :

“ No go ! . . . See anything of the blighter, Jim ? ”

“ Not a hair,” answered the man hailed.

There followed the noise of two pairs of feet converging on each other, and a little while later he guessed that the two searchers had joined the man whom they had left to watch.

“ Must have gone over the top after all,” growled one of the men.

“ But no ! ” cried the man Victor. “ To do that he must haf wings.”

"Then he doubled back, and crept away whilst we were poking among these cursed boulders. He isn't here anyway. A rabbit couldn't have hidden in those rocks without being found."

"Perdition. . . . What's it matter, anyway?" chimed in the third man. "We don't know who the beggar was, and he's not our particular game."

"Non! But you hear what zee man say to dat girl—dat we are zee men who fire zee bungalow to-day. How do heem know dat? We do not know who he ees, *non!* but *pardieu!* he know about us, an' dat ees not good. He say—"

"He said something that interests me a mighty lot more than that," interrupted one of the men, gruffly. "He gave that girl a name—"

"Lyncourt! By the Powers! It's just come to me. If she should chance to be old Dan's kid—"

"An' living in that swagger house with Parson Harry—"

"Lord! It's a cinch. It will be like squeezing a soaked sponge. The money will just squirt out like water."

"Oui! Eef. . . . But we go vaire fast, *mes amis*. We haf not yet discover dat dis Bayhurst ees our old acquaintance Harry le Curé, nor yet who ees dis man Stoodley—"

"Oh!" laughed one of the men, "there's a whole lot besides that we don't know. We don't know who sent that note to put us wise about Dan's whereabouts, or why he did it, an' what particular nuts we're pulling out of the fire for him—"

"Some guy who had a downer on him, I guess," broke in one of the others.

"But yes!" commented the man Victor. "Dat ees almost certain, but how did dat man know about us, dat he should write to give us zee news——"

"Snakes alive! You touch the spot, Victor! That is a corker."

"But eef dat man ees Harry le Curé," chuckled the Frenchman, "maybe he can zee corker uncork."

"If it is Parson Harry," said one of the men, "you can lay on it that he's playing a slim game—with big stakes somewhere around, an' whatever it is I'm going to share the pot. . . . Come along, you two, let's toddle."

"Toddle! Dat ees walk or maybe run! But to what place do we——"

"Back to that mansion we saw through the moonlight. There's bigger fry than that fellow we were chivvying just now. He ain't no more than a wallaby hopping across the gold trail. We don't know who he is—not a notion; an' he don't properly know who we are, which leaves us all square. We can leave him to find himself an' not worry about it. . . . The parson's our mark, an' we've just got to make sure, an' when we're dead certain we'll share his prosperity like brothers. . . . We were fools to come so far out of our way; an' I'm going back to take a squint at that fine house an' the man who owns it, an' maybe have a heart to heart talk with him."

Again there was a sound of feet on the rock; and

Guy Shortland, listening carefully, assured himself that all three were on the move. He could have shouted for joy; but, instead, he gently brushed aside the fallen gorse spines and set his ear to the ground. There was no doubt about it. The ruffianly trio were really departing. He crouched there listening until the slight noise of their steps died away, then he cautiously raised his head and surveyed the moonlit world.

In the valley below, the Dart, shimmering in the silver light, babbled its way to the sea. A bunch of ponies grazed quietly on the rough turf, and from the woods across the river came the melancholy hoot of owls. Assured that he was alone, he crept forth from his prickly hiding place, and with all speed made his way to the road. There for a minute he considered his course.

The men who had hunted him were on their way to Harford Lodge. Ought he to go there and warn its owner—Mr. Bayhurst? Scarcely had he asked himself the question when he realised that it was now much too late to do anything of the kind. The scoundrels by this time must be well on their way to the Lodge; and besides that, against what was he to warn Bayhurst? . . . The latter, as the words he had overheard that afternoon, was acquainted with the men. He, for a guess, had sent Sybil Lyncourt with those warning news-clippings.

The thought broke off half way, as another, preposterous of aspect yet claiming attention, leaped up with the suddenness of lightning. Someone had

sent to the three scoundrels particulars of David Harlowe's whereabouts—was it Bayhurst? Had the hand that had dispatched the warning sent the information which made that warning necessary? Was Mr. Bayhurst Parson Harry, and what was the particular significance of that soubriquet? And again, what part did Arthur Stoodley play in this complicated drama? His name, seen on an envelope at the hotel in Ashburton, had aroused the interest of the man who had trailed him all the way to Poundsgate, and further to Harford Lodge; and the mention of Henry Bayhurst as being in association with him had turned that interest in a new direction; whilst Sybil's name, overheard by the trio, had plainly a significance to which he himself had no clue.

As he turned down hill, making for the bridge across the river, he was profoundly disturbed—not for Mr. Henry Bayhurst—but for the girl whom he had met for the first time that day; and who, apart from the mystery in which she was involved, had stirred his interest profoundly. He remembered the words he had heard: "If she should chance to be old Dan's kid. . . ."

What was the significance of that possibility? There was no answer forthcoming to the question, but he was convinced that in the event of the man proving right it would mean inimical action against Sybil Lyncourt. The thought of that stirred him. Twice that day he had been brought into perilous conflict with the three scoundrels, and in ordinary

circumstances he would have avoided them for the future ; but with that girl involved in their nefarious schemes he could not stand aside—would not ! He would probe the mystery and serve her to the best of his ability, and perhaps——

A fox barked suddenly close at hand, startling him, and breaking the sequence of his thought ; but he resumed it, battering his mind with questions all the way to his house on the outskirts of Holne, finding no answers, and utterly baffled by the problem the exciting events of the day had provided.

Seated in front of a cheerful fire in the privacy of his study he went over all the events of the day carefully, but without approaching any solution of the mystery they presented. Before retiring, however, certain possible lines of investigation offered themselves, and on the morrow he proceeded to follow them. Driving into Exeter he called on an old friend of his father's, a retired canon, and after a little desultory conversation, asked if he had any old clergy lists. The canon, with a smile, directed him to a shelf where several volumes of Crockford reposed. Making a calculation he took down a volume twenty-four years old and began to search for the name he wanted—unsuccessfully.

“ Who are you looking for ? ” asked his friend.

“ Henry Bayhurst, who, I think, was in some sort of orders twenty years or so ago ? ”

His friend took the volume and, turning over the leaves, presently ran a finger down the close printed column.

"Here you are," he said with a smile. "Bayhurst, Henry Hippolyte. He was educated at Durham, ordained deacon in '97, priested '98, and was curate at Wallaloo, Queensland, at the time of this issue. That your man?"

"Almost certainly," answered Shortland, unable to hide his excitement at the thought that the respectable Mr. Bayhurst was indeed "Parson Harry." Then he laughed. "You don't happen to have files of the *Police Gazette* as well, do you?"

The canon laughed. "No, that is out of my line. But perhaps I can help you even there. I have a friend whose hobby is criminology, with a side-line in the way of collection of those papers of a lurid order that sweep up the crime of the week into a corner and call it news. . . . I should say his collection is unique. If it is an exciting plot you are after——"

"It isn't," laughed Shortland. "It is solid news—facts—that I want about a bushranging affair in Australia twenty years or so ago."

"Then Powys is your man. I'll take you along if you like."

"I shall be infinitely obliged if you will."

Ten minutes later the two of them were seated in a study, that might have been the filing-room of a great newspaper; the owner of which, a benevolent-looking old clergyman, who peered on the world through lenses of extraordinary thickness, listened to his explanation of his needs with beaming interest.

"I want one or two particulars of a bushranging affair at Wallaby Hill, in Queensland, about twenty or twenty-one years ago. I wonder if you can help me?"

"With pleasure, Mr. Shortland, and without difficulty, I think. I remember the business. It caused rather a stir at the time, almost as much as the Ned Kelly affair, and there were some rather entertaining pictures of the event. If you will wait one moment."

He went to his shelves and began to examine the dates on the back of the files. Two minutes later he took down one, opened it, and consulted what appeared to be a type-written table of contents. Then he laughed cheerfully.

"I grow old, but my memory still serves very well, where notable events are concerned."

Repressing a smile at the old cleric's conception of notable events, Shortland watched him whilst he carried the file to the table, and began to turn over the pink sheets of the paper, glimpsing now and again lurid illustrations of frightful tragedies. After three or four minutes the amateur criminologist looked up, beaming benevolently.

"I have it here. There are four issues in which the affair occupies considerable space. If you would care to read and make notes, Mr. Shortland, this room is at your disposal. It is always gratifying to me to know that my little hobby is of use to others."

"Thank you. There is no need for that. If

you can give me the names of the men involved, particularly the name of the bushranger who escaped and was not brought to trial——”

“I remember about him. He was known as Warrego Dan. His real name——” He broke off and consulted the pink sheet before him. “Ah! Here it is. Dan Lyncourt——”

“Lyncourt?”

The word was torn from the younger man by sheer amazement. There was an incredulous look on his face. He had stumbled upon an unbelievable thing, and yet as he sat there the truth forced itself upon him, and a light of conviction crept into his eyes. The possibility that had occurred to one of the rascally trio last night stood as a fact. Sybil Lyncourt was “old Dan’s kid,” the daughter of Warrego Dan, the bushranger who had escaped when his fellows had been taken, and who was responsible for the shooting of the two prospectors, one of whom had died.

“Yes,” answered the old priest in his mild voice. “He appears to have been a ruffian of the first water. . . . There was a reward of two hundred pounds offered for information that would lead to his arrest. That reward has never been claimed, for the simple reason that Warrego Dan seems to have faded from the earth. At any rate he has never been heard of since.”

As he finished speaking he peered through his heavy goggles at Shortland, then a little note of curiosity crept into his voice as he remarked: “You

seem a little surprised by the information I have given you, Mr. Shortland."

Guy Shortland pulled himself together and forced a laugh.

"I am! I was not expecting that particular name. But there is another thing that perhaps you can help me with. Who were the officers who arrested the three bushrangers who were taken?"

The old man turned to the file again, and after a moment gave the names.

"Sergeant Stoodley, Trooper Ashley and Inspector Harlowe. The latter received the commendation of the authorities for the ability and promptness with which he brought the criminals to justice."

"Thank you, sir," answered Shortland. "I am infinitely obliged to you for the information that I might have had some difficulty in obtaining."

The amateur criminologist beamed with pleasure and rubbed his hands. "My little hobby justifies itself. My friends laugh at it and say I have a morbid taste, but there have been occasions when even very highly-placed officers have consulted my files, which I am told are unique in their completeness."

"I can well believe that," answered Shortland politely.

"There are files here that you can find nowhere else," went on the old priest now fairly in the saddle of his hobby. "Papers that had but a short life, but hold much valuable information relating to the

world of crime, which is a very interesting world to a man whose life has run along quiet lines."

"I am sure of it," said Shortland, rising.

"If there is anything else in which I can help you I shall be only too glad to do so, Mr. Shortland."

"I do not know of anything——"

"No? But possibly something may arise. I will refresh my memory of this Wallaby Hill affair. If I find anything out-of-the-way about Lyncourt I will let you know. It has always seemed a strange thing to me that he should have escaped arrest. Of course many criminals have that luck, but the search for Lyncourt was very thorough, and it is certain he must have been helped in making what his particular world would call his get-away."

"Thank you. It is very good of you to offer," answered Shortland, and with his friend the canon took his leave.

Outside the canon laughed. "It is an odd sort of hobby for a man who is an archdeacon, but Powys was always a little strange in his tastes."

"It has its uses," replied Shortland, and refusing a pressing invitation to remain to lunch took his way back to Holne.

As he drove he was so absorbed in the discovery that Sybil Lyncourt was almost certainly the daughter of Warrego Dan that he forgot a smaller one that was yet not without significance. It recurred to him suddenly when, on the Ashburton road, he met an equestrian on a spirited mount, for whom he was forced to pull up and shut off the engine

to let the horse go by. The rider, to whom he himself was unknown, was Arthur Stoodley. The encounter instantly brought to mind the names of the officers which he had heard that morning—the first of which was Sergeant Stoodley. Swiftly his mind shaped a question. Was there any relationship between that sergeant of trooper police and the elegant horseman going up the road?

It seemed possible, no!—likely. Arthur Stoodley came from Australia. He was friendly with Bayhurst, who had spent some time in the Commonwealth, and if there were no connection between him and the dead sergeant the coincidence of name and place were strange, and it was even more odd that his arrival on Dartmoor should coincide with the arrival of the ex-convicts there. He recalled something that one of the ex-convicts had said outside the inn at Poundsgate on the previous night. Was Stoodley the son of the sergeant? If so, in what position did he stand to Bayhurst, who apparently was not quite what he seemed if the disreputableness of the three men who claimed acquaintance with him were taken into account? And had he or Bayhurst, or both of them together, betrayed to these precious scoundrels the whereabouts of David Harlowe, upon whom one of them had vowed to revenge himself twenty years ago?

He could find no answer to the questions which challenged him, and his mind reverted to the other and more important matter of Sybil Lyncourt's relationship to Warrego Dan. The men who had

been the associates of Lyncourt in that crime at Wallaby Hill believed he had betrayed them. They had vowed vengeance against him as against Harlowe and his officers. Would they, failing to find him, seek to revenge themselves through his daughter? It seemed more than likely. They had proved their ruthlessness already, and Harlowe plainly entertained the possibility.

There was a little stir of anxiety in his heart at the thought. Sybil Lyncourt might be Warrego Dan's daughter, but she was innocent of transgression against the scoundrels, and quite probably knew nothing of her father's treachery. Indignation at the possibility surged in him, overwhelming all other considerations. He had promised Harlowe that he would help to protect the girl, and the resolve to do so crystallised as he thought of her, in her innocence and weakness, a possible victim of vile ruffians.

Absorbed in thought he did not turn off at the fork which would have taken him directly to Holne, but continued to Poundsgate and beyond, following the road along which he had trailed the trio on the previous night. He had no definite objective, but in the background of his mind was a vague idea that possibly he might learn something of the activities of the three convicts, and more particularly the whereabouts of their lodging.

But as he topped the steep ascent and came on the open moor this idea was completely banished by the sight of Sybil Lyncourt herself, scampering

in the heather with a couple of dogs, one a Cocker spaniel and the other the terrier which had proclaimed his presence to her, when he had hidden in the grounds of Harford Lodge. She was running towards the road, and he slowed down the car to wait for her.

Simply clothed in a sports jumper and short tweed skirt, hatless, with the autumn sunshine glinting in her unbobbed hair, her face flushed with running, and her eyes dancing with merriment at the antics of her dogs, she was very different from the frightened girl of yesterday. Her hand, he saw, was still bandaged and partly covered by a glove—the fingers of which had been cut away ; the scratch above her ear was visible to him as she ran forward ; but despite these evidences it was difficult to associate her with the dark affair at the burned bungalow—her radiance, her manifest joy in life setting a gulf between her and the crime that had sent her scurrying in panic.

His heart warmed to her as he watched her ; then as he stopped the car and she became aware of his identity he saw recognition leap in her hazel eyes. She flushed deeply, hesitated, then calling her dogs to heel, moved forward. Guy Shortland slipped from the car and raised his cap.

“Good morning, Miss Lyncourt, this is an unexpected pleasure.”

The rough-haired terrier broke bounds and ran towards him, barking in a friendly fashion. He stooped and tickled the dog’s ears.

"My enemy of last night," he laughed, "and my friend this morning—a good omen!"

Her radiance was extinguished by the reference, a shadow fell on the beautiful face, and for a second distress shone in her eyes. Then she spoke gravely.

"I am very glad to see you well, Mr. Shortland. There was . . . trouble in our shrubbery last night . . . was there not?"

He laughed, making light of his perilous adventure.

"Oh, I was chased by those three men. A small thing! . . . You have seen nothing of them since?"

He asked his question with the most casual air in the world, but waited the answer with very real anxiety.

"Nothing! . . . I wonder why they came to Harford?"

He could not tell her that. She moved amid mysteries to which, as her manner convinced him, she had no key; and it was not for him with his imperfect knowledge to reveal the shadow of shame that might envelope her.

"Who knows?" he answered with a careless laugh. "They may have had a fancy for your view in the moonlight."

There was no lightening of the cloud on the beautiful face. The hazel eyes were fixed on him with grave steadfastness which he found rather disturbing, then she asked:

"How did you know they were there?"

"I followed them," he answered lightly. I was at Poundsgate and overheard them say they were

going to the Lodge, so decided to try my hand at shadowing. . . . It was an exciting and amusing experience."

"Yes," she said a little doubtfully, at the same time flashing an odd look at him. Then she added abruptly: "Last night you said those three men were the men who fired the bungalow. I wonder how you knew that?"

"By deduction," he replied cheerfully. "I saw them leaving the place just before you arrived there. They were in a tearing hurry and——"

He broke off sharply. A startled, alert look came in his eyes, which the girl immediately observed.

"What——"

"Don't look round, Miss Lyncourt. Go on talking—anything. I am watching something—someone. Ah!"

Again he had seen the thing which had startled him—a man's head lifted above the brown bracken a little distance away. He saw only the upper part of the fellow's face, and that was not sufficient for recognition, but he had no doubt as to the man's purpose. He was spying on either the girl or himself, to what end he could only guess. Noticing the apprehension in Sybil Lyncourt's eyes he hastened to reassure her.

"Don't be alarmed," he said quietly. "There is only one man, and if necessary I can deal with him."

"But the others?" she whispered.

"Yes! They may be about. But I think we

can beat them. . . . Get into the car. Not even three men dare stand in the way of a car, that is if it's really going. I will run you round to the main entrance of the Lodge. Ah, Quick! Call your dogs, I think there is a second man——”

He broke off as, calling her dogs, the girl sprang into the car. Following swiftly he set the engine going, and as he did so the shrill note of a metal whistle sounded from the bracken. Glancing round he saw the man whom he had first observed stand upright and wave an arm semaphore fashion, as if signalling to someone. Then the fellow began to run towards the car to intercept it. He laughed at the vanity of any such attempt, and as he did so heard the girl behind him give an apprehensive cry.

“ Oh ! ”

“ What is it ? ” he asked as the car began to glide forward.

“ There are two more men running this way.”

“ Indeed ! ”

Refusing to be rattled, automatically he changed gears, accelerated, then spared a glance for the pursuit. The three men were running for the road, the man whom he had first seen leading by at least forty yards, and in the very second of his glance, to his amazement, he saw a fourth man lift himself out of the bracken directly in front of the foremost man. As the man appeared, in the same instant his arm swung up and down and something in his hand—a life preserver Shortland guessed—crashed on the other's head. The runner, taken entirely by

surprise, went down under the blow like a man stricken to death in mid career ; and his assailant, darting off at a tangent, began to run across the moor with the speed of a hunted hare.

The other two men roared angrily, and swung aside to intercept him. The fleeing stranger however easily outdistanced them, and as the car gathered speed Shortland, venturing another glance, saw the man disappear over the slope. Ten seconds later he looked again. The pursuers had given up the chase, and standing together were staring down the hill. Divining their chagrin, he laughed with pleasurable excitement, then over his shoulder cried to the girl :

“ Miss Lyncourt, who in heaven’s name was that *Deus ex machina*, so handy with his sceptre ? ”

CHAPTER VII

DAVID HARLOWE

IDON'T know," answered the girl in a puzzled way. "I did not see his face." Then a note of apprehension came in her voice, as she asked in turn: "But what can those men want? Were they after you?"

"I think not," he replied quietly. "They could not know I was coming this way."

"You think they were watching me?" she asked quickly.

"Possibly, or keeping an eye on Harford Lodge. That seems the likelier alternative."

For a little time the girl did not reply, then in a low perplexed voice, as if speaking to herself rather than to him, she said: "I wonder why?"

To that Shortland offered no answer. What he had overheard in the gorse on the previous night had given him an indication of the reason of the three men for watching the Lodge, but it seemed unnecessary to trouble the girl with it at the moment. Quite deliberately he tried to turn the conversation.

"I think it will be best to keep straight on for a little while, then swing round by Dunstone and Buckland, don't you? Those fellows will not expect us to return that way."

"Please do what you think best," said the girl, and fell silent.

The silence lasted for some minutes, and in the end was broken by an abrupt inquiry.

"Mr. Shortland, do you know why these three men attacked Mr. Harlowe and then burned the bungalow?"

"How should I know?" he answered. "I was a mere spectator."

"But do you? Please do not put me off with an evasion."

"Well," he answered over his shoulder, "I have a vague idea that it was because Mr. Harlowe, who had been in the Australian police service, had been instrumental in sending those three men to gaol for a long term."

"But how do you know that?" she asked quickly.

"By putting two and two together, and by diligent inquiry," he answered easily. "Last night whilst I lay in some gorse with those fellows close at hand——"

"They were searching for you?"

"Yes." he laughed. "One of them had tried to fire the gorse with a view to making sure that I was not there."

"Oh!"

The word came in a horrified whisper, expressing a concern for him that he found wholly gratifying.

"Nothing to worry over," he said lightly. "It is true I had a bad few minutes when I heard the stuff crackling, but thank heaven there was no wind, and the fire would not travel."

"But why should they trouble you?"

"May have mistaken me for someone else."

"But for whom? Not for my guardian?"

"No! Mr. Arthur Stoodley possibly. He——"

"Arthur Stoodley," she interjected, an odd note in her voice. "Do you really think that?"

"Well, they had followed him from Poundsgate, and they certainly were very interested in him."

"He knew them?" asked the girl sharply.

"No. I don't think he had the slightest idea of their identity."

"But you, how did you know them?"

He laughed at the question. "Because I had seen them before. I saw them go to Mr. Harlowe's bungalow and leave it just before you arrived there. Their behaviour was so odd and their haste so manifest that I suspected that they had been up to no good, and I challenged one of them. I was promptly knocked down with a spanner, and have a lump on my head as big as a pigeon's egg at the present moment." He laughed again. "That sort of thing helps one to remember."

"Yes," answered the girl in a troubled voice. "Yes." Then she added: "Mr. Shortland, I think you ought not to be dragged into this trouble——"

"Dragged!" he laughed. "I waded in, and believe me, Miss Lyncourt, I find it immensely exciting, and besides——"

"Yes?" she asked as he paused.

"Well . . . er . . . it has brought me into touch with you, you know?"

For a moment there was no reply, and he regretted his impulsive words, fearing that he had offended her. Then behind him sounded a little laugh, banishing the fear.

“ You find that a compensation ? ”

“ Something more,” he laughed back, then grew grave. “ I am very happy to be able to serve you as this morning.”

“ And last night and yesterday afternoon ! I seem to be coming quite a burden to you, Mr. Shortland.”

There was something enigmatic in her tones, and he would have given much to have seen her face ; but for the moment the road demanded all his attention, and he dared not look behind him. He answered in laughing protest.

“ Not a burden, Miss Lyncourt. Believe me, no man could find your service that. I am only too glad to be of use.”

“ And you are not afraid of the danger it thrusts you into ? ” she asked curiously.

“ Good heavens, no ! ”

“ If I were to send to you——”

“ I should hurry,” he answered quickly. “ But you are not anticipating more trouble ? ”

There was no reply, and deliberately he pulled up the car and faced her. The hazel eyes were clouded, there was an almost tragic look on the beautiful face, and it was clear to him what the answer to his question was.

“ Tell me, Miss Lyncourt. Let me help you, if I can.”

"Oh," she whispered back, "there is so little that I can tell you . . . so much that I do not know. . . . But I have a feeling of impending disaster. Since yesterday . . . no! Since Arthur Stoodley came, things have not been the same at the Lodge."

She broke off, and looked down at her bandaged hand as if it pained her. Involuntarily Shortland's eyes followed her glance, and remembering a question which had troubled him he asked impulsively:

"He gave you that ring?"

"Yes," she answered in a low voice.

"Then he and you are——"

"No! No!" she interrupted quickly, anticipating the question. "The ring was a little gift for my birthday. . . . It fitted that finger—you understand?—but it was to be altered. . . . My guardian said that would be unnecessary trouble. He would like me to marry Arthur Stoodley, but——"

"Yes?" he asked.

"I—I do not like him. I cannot say why."

"I do not like thee, Dr. Fell . . ." he quoted.

"Yes! That is it. I was aware of it the first moment when we met, three months ago."

"So long?"

"Yes. He has been at Harford most of the summer. From the first—oh! why am I telling you, a stranger almost, all——"

"Not a stranger, Miss Lyncourt, believe me, but

a friend. Tell me anything you wish. If I can help you——”

“There is so little to tell. Except that I do not like him, and that I think that sometimes my guardian is afraid of him.”

“Ah! . . . But why?”

“I do not know. . . . If I did——” she broke off and added a little incongruously: “And now there is this new trouble . . . Mr. Harlowe . . . these men who are watching Harford. . . . I feel as if there were some shadow over the place . . . over . . . me!”

Her voice shook at the last words, and quite suddenly she broke down and buried her face in her hands. The terrier moved quietly, and putting his front paws in her lap whined softly, whilst Shortland, uncertain how to act, or what to say, watched her, very much perturbed. Then almost as suddenly as she had broken down she recovered. Lifting her face, she cried in a voice that she could not make steady:

“You must think me very stupid——”

“No!” he said emphatically. “I can understand that you are worried, Miss Lyncourt. . . . And you must call on me in case of need. You will promise?”

Her eyes met his for a moment in level gaze, then a little flood of colour surged in her face.

“Yes,” she answered simply.

“Then take my address. For the next six weeks I am at Torwood, Holne. It is on the outskirts of the

village, rather solitary, but easy to find. A message there will bring me to you as quickly as a bird. . . . And, believe me, I shall be entirely happy to serve you. . . . Now I think we will drive on."

He started the car anew and without further incident made for the main gate of the Lodge. There was no one in sight at the moment, and as the house was clearly visible, with a gardener busy at the edge of the shrubbery, for reasons of his own he decided not to drive up to the house. Fortunately, Sybil Lyncourt was of the same mind.

"I will get out here, Mr. Shortland, if you don't mind. I should hate to have to explain things to my guardian, it would worry him."

She opened the door and stepped out, the two dogs leaping and barking around her.

"I do not know how to thank you——"

"Oliver Twist's way will do," he laughed. "Ask for more, you know. It is a proof of good service."

The ghost of a smile came on her face. "If I must, I shall not hesitate."

"Don't!" he answered. And remember the address—Torwood."

"I shall remember."

She offered her hand as to a friend, and turning, whistled to her dogs. Shortland waited. He would see her as far as the gardener before driving away, after that nothing was likely to happen to her. He watched the lissom figure, unconscious of other things; and Sybil Lyncourt, not hearing his car start and divining what was in his mind, when she

reached the gardener, turned and waved her hand. He waved back, and then stooped over the gear lever. As he did so the sound of hoofs broke on his ears, and glancing round he saw Arthur Stoodley. The man was quite close, staring at him from the height of horseback with malevolent and jealous eyes. It was clear to him that the other had witnessed his parting with Sybil Lyncourt, and did not approve of their association. But that fact troubled him not at all. Already he had conceived a strong dislike for the man, and certain suspicions which had been born when he had overheard him talking with Mr. Bayhurst had deepened during his drive with the girl. Arthur Stoodley was handsome, he might or might not be as rich as was rumoured, but there was something about him that did not ring true.

It seemed as if he were about to speak. A stormy look came on his face as he glanced up the drive at the slim girlish figure now approaching the house, and Shortland anticipated some violent outburst. But it did not come. The raging look passed, and instead of hot words came a coldly contemptuous laugh; then setting spurs to his horse the man passed the gates and rode at a canter up the drive.

A troubled look came on Shortland's face as he started the car. That contemptuous laugh worried him far more than any hot words could have done. Notwithstanding his manifest jealousy and momentary rage, it indicated that Stoodley was very sure of the situation, and not worried by any thought of losing Sybil. The reason for that confidence was not

difficult to guess. The fellow knew the secret of the girl's paternity and was prepared to exploit it to the full ; and apparently if her suspicions were correct, he held a further secret which gave Bayhurst, her guardian, into his hands. The two things taken together might prove a strong lever to help forward his purpose, but the girl's dislike of him was to be taken into account, and there was the possibility of Stoodley meeting unexpected trouble of his own from the three men who had displayed such interest in him on the previous night. In any case, he told himself, Arthur Stoodley should not have his way unhindered. Having been drawn into this mysterious business, for Sybil Lyncourt's sake he would do his best to thwart the man. And there was Harlowe. He would help when—— The thought of the latter set his mind working on a new line, and after lunch he walked in the direction of the ruined bungalow. Within half a mile of it he encountered the local constable, a garrulous man of the name of Udy, and after the rural postman, the greatest gossip of the countryside. Knowing him, and guessing that he was returning from the scene of the fire, Shortland stopped, ostensibly to pass the time of the day, but really to discover if the authorities had any suspicions of the truth concerning the destruction of the bungalow.

Constable Udy gossiped with his usual freedom until the novelist mentioned the fire. Then an awkwardness showed itself in his manner, his tongue became unaccountably clogged, and he betrayed a

disposition to move on. Shortland, however, held him by a direct question.

"Has any sign of Mr. Harlowe been found, Udy? Is it true that he was burned in his house?"

The constable shuffled a little, tried to look wooden, but evidenced secret knowledge by the flash in his eyes.

"Nothing has been found, sir. The ashes have been raked through and there isn't a bone anywhere. . . . That's all that I can tell you, except that Adam, his man-of-all-work, is back, an' isn't worrying so much as might be expected."

"Then you think that Mr. Harlowe was not burned?"

"I think nothing, sir. If he wasn't at home when the fire broke out he wasn't there when it finished, and if he's well an' able, I reckon he'll show up on the moor again before long. . . . Anyway, I can't do nothing without a corpse, can I, now?"

"Well, not much," laughed Shortland.

"So I'm going to let sleeping dogs lie till they wake up an' bark, an' I'll be much obliged if you'll keep what I've told you to yourself. Adam tells me the bungalow wasn't insured, so nobody was likely to burn it for the fun of the thing, an' accidents have a way of happening, an' it's no crime for a house to be burned out. Happens every day."

"Yes."

"An' Mr. Harlowe hates a fuss——" the constable checked himself, and a little flush showed in

his bronzed face as he hastily added: "At least that's what Adam says, an' he ought to know; an' 'tisn't for me to fly in the face of a gentleman's wishes without cause."

"No." Shortland agreed, smilingly. "Of course not."

"So there it stops—for me. An' I'll take it as a favour, sir, for you not to speak what I have told in confidence—"

"Don't worry, constable. I shall not say a word."

"Thank you, kindly, sir. Now I'll move on. But if I was you I wouldn't traipse so far on the moor—not to-day. There's a mist on the tors, an' if it comes down 'twill be as easy as winking to lose yourself."

"Much obliged, Udy. I will be careful."

The officer moved on, and Shortland, resuming his way, laughed to himself. It was clear as daylight that the constable knew that there had been no tragedy at the bungalow, and that he had been persuaded to silence by someone—either Harlowe himself or his man, Adam. The latter— He remembered suddenly the opportune man with the life preserver who had run to Sybil Lyncourt's help.

"Of course!" he murmured. "He was the man—keeping a counter-watch on the watchers!"

Glad to have the explanation of a thing that had puzzled him, he continued on his way; and presently reached the point from which he had watched events at the bungalow on the previous day. Dropping

in the dry heather, he surveyed the gutted house. It had the desolation and forlornness that is characteristic of a home destroyed by fire. The fire had burned itself out, and the bare blackened walls, the gables lifting themselves starkly to the sky, had an aspect of utter melancholy. The place being remote, there was not a single one of the curious sight-seers who flock to similar scenes in more populous neighbourhoods. It appeared to be quite deserted ; and apart from the moorland ponies browsing on the hillside behind, apparently he himself was the only living thing in the vicinity.

After a little time he transferred his attention to the out-buildings behind. Between the bare gables he could see the garage and the chauffeur's quarters quite clearly, but not the curtained side-window. He watched the single chimney carefully. No smoke issued from it, and to all appearance it was as deserted as the burnt house itself.

After a little time he rose and crossing the valley entered the grounds of the bungalow, making his way past the fire-blackened walls to the buildings beyond. When almost at the garage door he came to a standstill. The door was closed, not with the stone to hold it in place, which Stoodley had set there after breaking his way in, but with its own latch or lock. Someone, it seemed, had already repaired the damage that had been done.

The realisation of that made him pause. He had no wish to be observed prying on another man's property, and did not relish the possibility of having

to make apologies and explanations to the chauffeur if after all he chanced to be about.

In the very act of turning away there reached him the high sustained note of a car climbing a long ascent on its middle gear. He looked towards the high road across the valley, but saw nothing ; then listening carefully realised suddenly that the vehicle was coming up the valley. That meant almost certainly that whoever was driving it was coming to the bungalow. His ears told him the car was making a good pace, and that it would reach the gate before he himself could do so.

Who the driver might be he could only conjecture. The chauffeur, Adams, or—yes !—the three ex-convicts. They had used a car for their visit yesterday, and now, for some reason or other, they might be returning to the scene of their scoundrelly exploit. That possibility drove him helter-skelter towards the shrubbery, where, concealed among the bushes at the foot of the hedge which bounded the garden, he would be able to watch the gate and the approach to the house ; and whence, as the opportunity offered, he might be able to slip away unnoticed.

He heard the car stop, caught the sound of a door as it was closed vigorously, then at the gate appeared a tall man of extraordinarily withered appearance. The newcomer stood for a moment staring towards the ruined building, then opening the gate he passed inside, walking slowly towards the house. One thing Shortland noted immediately, and that was that the

man was lame in the left leg, but otherwise, notwithstanding the withered face and the whiteness of hair and beard, he was quite vigorous, and there was a keenness in the eyes that stared about him appraisingly which was evidence of an unsubdued spirit.

When he reached the corner of the house he halted as if to consider the damage wrought by the fire, and after a moment moved to one of the ruined windows and stared inside. Then he moved forward again, the keen eyes darting hither and thither, and finally the man came to a standstill, absorbed as it seemed in thought, for his eyes were fixed on vacancy.

At that moment Shortland, from his place of concealment, chanced to look at the upper curtained window of the garage. As he did so he experienced a shock of surprise, for at the window, less than half-hidden by the curtain and staring down at the newcomer, was David Harlowe, amazed apprehension betraying itself in both face and eyes. That he recognised the lame intruder seemed clear, and that he was afraid of being seen by him was equally clear; for as the visitor came out of his absorption, and lifted his head to look round once more, he hastily withdrew from sight behind the curtain.

Intrigued beyond measure, Shortland divided his attention between the window and the man in the yard below, asking himself at the same time, who on earth the man was that Harlowe should so manifestly be afraid of him? For his part, the stranger continued to look round, then observing a

packing case outside one of the out-houses, hobbled to it and deliberately read the label upon it.

“Same name, but——”

The words reached Shortland quite clearly, and sent him speculating again. Who was the man? Obviously he was known to Harlowe, and since the packing case label for a guess bore Harlowe's name, the words seemed to indicate that at least the name was known to the man, but that he entertained some doubt as to the identity of the bearer of it. The man moved forward a little, pottering about aimlessly, as it seemed, to Shortland, who glanced up at the window again. It remained vacant, but he had no doubt whatever that Harlowe was there, and he visioned him behind the curtain, watchful and apprehensive. But in heaven's name why? What reason could he have for being afraid of this withered white-haired stranger who had invaded his premises, apparently drawn by mere curiosity?

No answer offered itself, and greatly puzzled he continued to watch until the lame man turned away with the obvious intention of taking his departure. At that he himself slipped quickly through the shrubbery and passed out of the gate before the other had rounded the house. Running lightly down the road for perhaps forty yards, he turned and began to stroll slowly back, carefully timing himself to reach the gate just as the other emerged.

“Good afternoon,” he said in the friendly country way.

“The same to you, young man,” answered the

other in a crisp way. Then asked : “ Can you tell me where the owner of this property is to be found ? ”

Remembering the look on Harlowe’s face, Shortland decided that he could not, and answered evasively :

“ Can’t say ; he was burned out of house and home yesterday.”

“ So I have heard, but I hoped that I might find him about. Anyhow, it is not of much importance. . . . Perhaps you can tell me if this road makes the high road further up ? ”

“ It does : goes down the valley, across, and up the other side, a short but stiff climb.”

“ You are going that way perhaps ? ” said the man, plainly meaning to offer a lift.

“ Yes. I am working up to the high road and back to Holne.”

“ Holne ? ” the stranger laughed. “ That is a coincidence. I am going there myself. May I offer you a lift ? It looks as if fog or rain was coming across the moor.”

“ I shall be grateful, sir.”

“ Then get in. I shall be glad of company, particularly if you know the road. I lost myself for a time coming up.”

Guy Shortland took his seat ; and the owner of the car climbed in after him, and as they started, glanced at him and remarked : “ You will excuse me, have we met before ? ”

“ I don’t think so ? ” answered Shortland.

“ But your face seems oddly familiar to me.”

" Possibly," laughed the younger man. " It appears in the press sometimes. I am Shortland—the writer——"

" Ah ! " That is it ! " The stranger laughed. " I saw a picture in the *Melbourne Argus* the other week. You have a story running there that I find intriguing. I am proud to meet you, Mr. Shortland ; very. My name is Harlowe—David Harlowe."

" David Harlowe ? "

The repetition of the name was torn from Shortland by sheer amazement ; and the other gave him a swift glance of surprise.

" Why . . . yes . . . Mr. Shortland. David Harlowe, late inspector of the Queensland Mounted Police. You seem surprised."

CHAPTER VIII

AN OLD STORY

FOR the moment Guy Shortland was too stunned to speak. He stared at the man incredulously, then aware of the other's questioning glance he forced a laugh.

"Surprised! Yes. And with reason." He laughed again, more naturally this time. "Do you know that the man of whom you were asking just now, the owner of the burned house behind us, has the same name as yourself?"

The stranger laughed back.

"I do. It was the coincidence that brought me this way to see him. I heard the name casually in a mention of the fire at the Church House Inn this morning——"

"And you didn't hear that the other David Harlowe was supposed to have been destroyed in his burning house?"

"No. Is that so?"

"Well, he has not been seen since."

"A bad business, if it is so. . . . I had hoped to find a relative, a long lost cousin, who came to England some years ago. . . . You knew my namesake here?"

"I—er—had met him."

"What sort of a man was he?"

Shortland gave a fairly faithful sketch of the

other David Harlowe; and the man at his side, listening, shook his head.

“Six feet, almost—you say. That precludes any possibility of the man being my cousin. No man adds four inches to his stature in his maturity.”

“No,” agreed Shortland. “It isn’t usual.”

The other gave his attention to a rough and steep incline; affording Guy Shortland a breathing space in which he made an effort to get the run of things. There might be two men of the same name in the same force in a far province of the empire, but that both should be inspectors was carrying the coincidence into the realm of the improbable; and, granted that, either this white-bearded man at his side was an utter imposter, or the man in the chauffeur’s room at the bungalow——

He visioned the face he had seen at the window, utterly startled and apprehensive, watching this other man, and hiding from him, clearly afraid of being seen by him. That, he told himself, argued previous acquaintance, recognition on the part of the surreptitious watcher, and a fear that he in turn might be recognised. But, of course, it was not decisive. This stranger might very well be hostile to the man hiding above the garage. For anything that he knew to the contrary, it was possible that he was in league with David Harlowe’s enemies, and had merely adopted his name and told the story about a long-lost cousin in order to lull any suspicion, whilst he ferreted out the truth about the other’s escape. The possibility of that set him

on his guard. The man should learn nothing from him until he knew the truth as it lay between the two. He was aroused from his meditation by a sharp whistle from his companion.

“Phew!”

He looked up and realised the occasion for it. The fog, which had hidden the crests of the tors, was spreading down the hillside, and now a great bank of it lay in front of them in a trough of the undulating road.

“Looks pretty bad,” he agreed. “Good thing it isn’t dark, or we’d be stuck here for the night. Fortunately, at this time of the year there isn’t any crowding of traffic on the moorland roads.”

They struck the fog, which was like a vaporous blanket, hiding everything in front and compelling them to go dead slow. Half a minute or so later visibility shortened to within a few yards, and the mist, cold and drenching, sent a chill to the bones.

“We must have the hood up—if you will help me—my young friend.”

Shortland was only too glad to help and was out of the car the moment it stopped, and in brief time the hood was stretched and in place. The owner of the car laughed.

“We shall be warmer now, though matters are not improved so far as seeing is concerned.”

They crept forward at a snail’s pace, the fog, to all appearances, worsening every moment, completely obliterating all contours and land marks. Twice on level ground the car left the road and they

were bumping in the heather; and in a very few minutes, such was the density of the vapour, Shortland had not the remotest idea of their whereabouts.

"The mist is thickening," he commented.

"No question about that. But we've got to chance it," answered his companion. "We can't stay here for the night. My complaint is rheumatism."

He ended with a cheerful laugh, and they continued the crawl forward, hooting from time to time, and keeping a sharp look out for other traffic and straying ponies. They encountered neither, and presently watching the side of the road carefully Shortland saw a small stone building of unmistakeable contours.

"Wesleyan Chapel," he commented. "We must have reached Poundsgate."

"Good," laughed the driver. "We're getting on."

They moved down hill cautiously, reached the hamlet, and at the turn by the inn were halted by some cows meandering up the road. Whilst they were waiting there, a sound of voices reached them, apparently from the inn itself, and in particular, one shouting in something like anger.

"Ah tell you eet was haf-a-crown dat Ah pay. An', *mon Dieu!* Ah weel not be cheat."

Shortland gave a little start. He had no doubt of the identity of the speaker, and guessed that in the inn were the three men from whom he had fled with Sybil Lyncourt a few hours before. He was won-

dering whether they had made their headquarters there, or been driven to temporary shelter by the fog, when the man by his side leaned forward and switched off the engine.

"Why—" began Shortland, only to be interrupted.

"S-s-s-h-h, Mr. Shortland. I'm listening for something."

Shortland did not ask for what he was listening, but sat quite still, straining his ears for any further sound from the inn. None came, and after perhaps thirty seconds the other switched on the engine again, and as they resumed their crawl gave an odd laugh.

"Wondering what I was listening for, hey, Mr. Shortland?"

"Well—yes?"

"It was for a voice." He laughed again as he spoke. "I thought I heard one that I knew, back there, though it must be all twenty years since I last heard it. . . . But well, it just can't be the man—not here! . . . My mind must have played a trick on me, though I've as good a memory for voices as for faces."

Shortland, uncertain of the man's identity, maintained a discreet silence. If this man of whom the David Harlowe he knew had shown such apprehension were in league with the three ex-convicts, the words might be no more than a feeler—meant to draw him out. After a brief interval the other spoke again reminiscently.

"The man that voice reminded me of is a fellow, name of André, a violent character, who by my efforts got twenty years for bushranging up in Queensland."

"Indeed! That's interesting! . . . But what would such a ruffian be doing here in the wilds of Devon?"

"Exactly! That's what proves my memory is at fault."

The man laughed. "This would be no hunting ground for Victor André, or for the two scoundrels with whom he was pals. . . . They were all three in the affair of which I spoke, and where one is to-day the other two are as sure as the lamb was with Mary."

Guy Shortland displayed interest without committing himself. "Then they're out of prison now?"

"These two or three months . . . but how long they will be is another horse. They're a desperate lot, and Victor André is by nature a wolf. When he was sentenced he vowed vengeance on four men, two of whom, who were under me, are dead. I am the third—"

"And the fourth?" interjected Shortland with a tenseness that moved the other to a flashing glance at him.

"The fourth is a man—name of Lyncourt, alias Warrego Dan—of whom nothing has been heard since the affair for which André and his pals were convicted. He was supposed to have been in it with

them and to have done what shooting there was, but I have always had my doubt of that. André got a notion that Lyncourt had sold them, which wasn't the fact, and that he'd made off with the spoil, which, since it was never recovered, was very likely true."

Shortland was in a whirl. The man at his side spoke with the simplicity and directness of one who had been a participator in the events to which he referred. But then so had the other David Harlowe whom he knew, and whose secret he had promised to guard. Again the thought occurred to him that the man might be leading him on to make some admission of knowledge, and he deliberately avoided that, offering instead a hypothetical suggestion.

"Suppose you were right about that voice—that it was the fellow André who was speaking? Could he know that you were here?"

"Not likely," the other laughed. "I live in Rutland. And since nobody knew I was coming this way he couldn't track me here. . . . But it's no more than a conjecture any way. It just couldn't be André."

"You could settle that easily enough."

"By going back and having a look at the man whose voice I heard? . . . Yes." The man laughed again. "That would be dead easy and a waste of time—a mere wild-goose chase! André isn't looking for me on Dartmoor—I'll vow."

"But he may be looking for that other man—Lyncourt—did you say?"

"The devil! I never thought of that! . . . If it should be so!" A doubtful look came on the thin face. Then with a flash in his eyes he added sharply: "It may be. A man's voice is as individual as his face. No two are so much alike that they haven't a difference somewhere. . . . And come to think of it, it is d——d odd that there should be a man speaking broken English reminding me of Victor André in a place like this. . . . He might be after Warrego Dan—that's Lyncourt, you know! . . . After all, I've a notion to go back. Perhaps you wouldn't mind?"

"Not in the least," answered Shortland.

"I could leave you in the car. It's no use trying to turn on this hill. I shall be back in ten minutes or so."

He pulled up the car on the steep hill, and slipping out stood for a moment holding the door handle, the doubtful look back in his face. Then he laughed.

"It's plumb foolish! . . . But I've got to go."

He closed the door and began to limp up the road. Shortland for a moment or two sat listening until the sound of his steps died away, then a thought came to him. What if the suspicion that had once or twice occurred to him were correct? If the man were in association with the three ex-convicts he might have gone to bring them back with him. The place was lonely and under cover of the mist, things could be done there that would be impossible in the hamlet. Scarcely had the thought occurred to him

before he stepped out of the car, and looking carefully round noted a high bank on the left. He climbed it quickly, and dropping on the farther side, followed it in the direction which the other had taken. When he had walked about fifty yards he halted, lit a cigarette, and waited with straining ears.

Some little time passed, and he had finished the cigarette and thrown away the stub, when there reached him the sound of feet coming from the hamlet. There was only one pedestrian, who walked unevenly—a lame man. Reassured, he ran back, swung himself over the bank, and when the white-bearded stranger emerged from the mist he was standing by the car, the owner of which greeted him with a rueful laugh.

“That fellow had gone when I got there. The landlord says he is an Italian lately come labouring on some waterworks somewhere up on the moor. . . . I knew it was foolishness to think he could be the fellow I mistook him for, but I was bound to make sure.”

“A pity you didn’t see him all the same, Mr.—er—Harlowe. When one gets an idea of that sort in one’s head it has a trick of persisting.”

“This one won’t,” laughed the other. “It is too silly to survive.”

They crawled forward again, crossed Newbridge, and a whole twenty minutes later reached the hamlet which was their destination.

“Here we are! Heaven be praised,” said the lame man, then extended an invitation. “Mr.

Shortland, won't you come in and keep an old man company. I'm the sole guest at the inn."

"A little later in the evening, if you like, Mr. Harlowe. Just now I must get home, or the house-keeper, who is a moor woman, may get alarmed for me—with this mist coming down so thick."

"What do you say to dinner?"

"I shall be delighted."

"Then at seven o'clock, sharp. I'll go indoors and comb through the wine list. So-long!"

Very thoughtfully Guy Shortland made his way to his "furnished house," and there in front of a log fire and over innumerable cigarettes considered the new development in the affair in which he was involved represented by the man with whom he was to dine.

"There can't be two David Harlowes both concerned in that Wallaby Hill business," he told himself. "One of them must be a pretender . . . which?"

It was not easy to decide. Both of them had spoken with apparent frankness of that old affair in Queensland, and one of them, for the part played in it, but for his own intervention, would have been an incinerated corpse. He liked that man. He had promised to keep his secret, and pledged himself to help if Sybil Lyncourt were threatened. But as he sat there he recalled the face he had seen at the window above the garage, startled and apprehensive. For some reason the man who had displayed no fear when talking of the convict trio who had

attempted his life, was afraid of the other man of the same name, whom, according to his story, the merest accident had taken to the ruined bungalow. Why was he afraid? Was that thin-faced elderly man, who limped in his walk, a more terrible enemy than the desperadoes who had left him for dead and set his house afire?

It was difficult to believe, and yet he had the evidence of his eyes. The truth was not to be shirked. Harlowe the first was deadly afraid of Harlowe the second. And if the latter were not an impostor then. . . .

He saw the issue quite clearly. Half a dozen things indicated it. The warning news-cutting, the attack made on him, the man's anxiety for Sybil Lyncourt, his failure to call in the police, his fear of this newcomer—all pointed one way, to one thing. If he were not David Harlowe, then beyond question he was Warrego Dan, and Warrego Dan might very well be much more afraid of the retired inspector of police whom he had once escaped, than of his old companions in crime.

He whistled thoughtfully to himself as he considered the conclusion. If it were the right one, and if that white-haired man down at the Church House Inn got an inkling of the truth, there was more trouble for Warrego Dan than that represented by his one-time comrades. The retired inspector would be like an old war-horse smelling new battle. He would be tempted to round-off his old achievement by effecting the arrest of the reputed leader

of the men who had already paid the penalty of their crime. He could scarcely resist such a temptation to add to his laurels, and if by any chance he encountered André or one of his companions, he could not fail to learn the truth.

And that meant bitter trouble for Sybil Lyncourt, who was ignorant of the fact that Warrego Dan was her father. That Bayhurst was aware of the relationship he was sure. Was Arthur Stoodley—for a guess the son of Sergeant Stoodley—also aware of it? It seemed almost certain; but in that case why should he seek to marry Warrego Dan's daughter—and at the same time be anxious to be assured of her father's death? Henry Hippolyte Bayhurst was anxious for that assurance also, though presumably he had sent the warning that Warrego Dan's old comrades had been set at liberty. Why?

He divined some scheme by which the pair meant to profit through the death of the man who had escaped by a miracle. What that scheme was he could only dimly guess, but the indications were that it was to be consummated through the death of the man and marriage of the girl. A hard look came on his face as he thought of the latter, and recalled Stoodley's contemptuous laugh. Here, perhaps, was the ground of the fellow's certainty. Knowing the truth he proposed to blackmail Sybil Lyncourt into marriage, that in some way he might profit; for notwithstanding the jealous flame he had seen in the man's eyes, he did not believe that passion alone dictated his purpose.

The look on his face hardened to grimness. Then as he thought of the girl—if his reasoning was correct—a pawn in the game that scoundrels were playing—innocent, helpless—a flame came in his eyes, and his heart beats perceptibly quickened. He laughed with sharp excitement.

“ Warrego Dan can look after himself, but . . . Sybil—— I keep my promise there.”

An hour and a half later, carrying a hurricane lantern on which his rustic housekeeper insisted, he made his way through the dense fog and darkness to the Church House Inn to be pleasurable welcomed by his host; and after dinner he deliberately led the conversation to the incident of the afternoon, and was rewarded with a full account of the affair at Wallaby Hill. In the course of it he found opportunity for a question that he burned to ask.

“ Arthur Stoodley? Was that the Sergeant’s name? Do you know if he had a son?”

“ What makes you ask?” demanded his host.

“ Oh, I have recently met a fellow of that name who hails from Australia—a handsome, dashing sort—a fine horseman, a first-class shot——”

“ And a rogue of the first water!” broke in the older man vehemently, “ if he’s the sergeant’s son, as seems likely.”

“ Indeed! Is that so?”

“ It is, and more’s the pity. There’s something in Holy Scripture about a good tree not being able to bring forth evil fruit, but it’s a saying that doesn’t

always go. The sergeant was one of the best ; his son—one of the worst young scoundrels that ever stepped—broke his heart."

"So bad?"

"Worse ! Though, thank God, the sergeant never knew the blackest thing of all ; being happily dead and out of the way of bitter knowledge."

Guy Shortland waited, hoping the other would continue, which, after a pause, he did.

"A policeman, as I daresay you'll know, carries more secrets than are ever proclaimed to the world. Things come his way that can't always be shouted from the house-tops, but which may sometimes become solid evidence against some criminal if connecting links can be found. Most policemen's note books have lots of indeterminate facts of that sort, and Sergeant Stoodley was a methodical officer. He made more and fuller notes than most. It was a sort of mild mania with him but very useful, as some of us found once or twice when material was wanted to complete a case. When he died he'd a small library of note books full of details about cases he'd been engaged on, and a whole lot of the sort about cases that hadn't reached the courts, because some links of evidence were missing, though there wasn't a shadow of doubt about the guilt of the parties involved. Justice is cautious and the law of evidence is a damned queer thing, favouring the criminal every time, as any officer will tell you. . . . But you'll see that evidence that a court would regard as inconclusive would be a

pretty powerful lever in the hands of a black-mailer——”

“ Ah ! ”

“ You tumble to it, I see. . . . When the sergeant died his son got hold of his case books, and after a diligent study of them began to make use of them in that fashion. . . . He’d lots of material to his hand and more than one big name to go for, and he’d no scruples. Lord knows how many he made pay, but the suicide of a prominent man brought the thing to light and spoiled Stoodley’s easy game for a time, and he was forced to run. He’d have been in gaol for a good stretch but for a man or two, who remembered the sergeant, shutting eyes until he’d cleared the country. . . . And wherever he is he’s surely a rascal.”

The old man fell silent, and sat frowning, disturbed by his own thoughts. Shortland, understanding his bitterness, let a little interval go by before asking his next question.

“ About Warrego Dan ? You said this afternoon that you doubted that he was responsible for the shooting at Wallaby Hill. What makes you doubt ? ”

“ Because Dan wasn’t that sort,” replied the other with quiet conviction. “ I’ll tell you something that was not told in court during the trial, when naturally his name was mentioned. . . . We nearly had Dan—at least I was near getting him. After he had broken away I started with a black tracker to follow him. Three days later the tracker

fell ill, and I left him with some of his own folk and pushed on after Dan. I trailed him to a rocky gully, and saw the smoke of his camp fire a mile ahead. That made me eager and cautious together. I left my horse and climbed the rocks to get topside of Lyncourt, thinking that with him under my carbine he would be forced to surrender. I got pretty close to him, and was just congratulating myself when I had an accident. A piece of rock gave way and I shot down—a goodish way. . . . Next thing I remember was that I was lying by Dan's fire, my carbine, pistol and side-arm neatly piled at the other side of the fire, and Dan himself on his knees busy setting splints to my broken leg. . . . You'll have noticed that I limp? . . . Dan wasn't a surgeon, but he did his best, and it was sheer nonsense for me to talk about the law and arrest and what not, when I was in his hands and all he needed to do was to ride off and leave me there to roast to death in the sun.

He didn't ride off. He made me comfortable, then had me scrawl a note to the nearest police station, and with that he rode off to find a black runner to take it. You'd have thought he'd done enough at that, but no, he waited hours at a high point watching until he saw two troopers riding towards the gully, and knowing then that I was all right he slipped quietly away.

“Naturally, I didn't shout to the two who came looking for me to go after him.” The speaker laughed. “I suppressed all news of him—but you

can understand why I don't believe that Dan Lyncourt shot two decent men in cold blood. . . . He wasn't that sort."

"But he was in the business. He had the gold—"

"Yes! And seemingly he made good use of it!"

"How on earth do you know that?"

"By inference. I'll tell you something that's not widely known and was not mentioned in the papers when this business came up as it did the other day. . . .

Within ten years of being robbed every blessed one of those prospectors got a pot of money equal to what they'd been relieved of—plus interest. I heard of it from one of them, by accident, and I ferreted out the others and found it true. They didn't know where it came from except from a lawyer in San Francisco, but it isn't difficult to guess, hey? An' there's another thing. One of the prospectors, who was shot, died. Well, at Brisbane there's a memorial endowment at the hospital in his name, anonymously sent. . . . Dan again, if I know anything, an' there you are. . . . He wasn't a bad lot, I'll take my oath; an' how he came to be in that Wallaby Hill affair leaves me guessing, just as where he hid himself is a fair puzzler too."

The man fell silent, staring thoughtfully into the fire, and Shortland recalling again the apprehensive face he had seen that afternoon was thoughtful also, but after a little time he said abruptly:

"I think I rather like your Warrego Dan!"

"Same here," laughed the other. "Dan was a sportsman if he wasn't a surgeon. And I reckon he's gone a long way to expiate that old crime."

"But if the law got him——"

"Yes! There's the rub for Dan. If he's alive an' came out in the open an' some officer got wind of him, he'd swing as like as not. Long arm—and all that sort of thing, you know. That's the worst of law. It's so confoundedly cold-blooded, an' takes no account of the human element."

Again there was a silence broken only by the crackling of the fire and the drip of water from the eaves outside. Then through the silence came a sound of light feet hurrying. They turned into the inn, there followed a murmur of voices and then a knock on the door of the room where the two men sat.

"Come in," said Shortland's host.

A maid servant entered.

"Please zir, there's somebody wants to speak to Mr. Shortland—a young lady—Miss Lyncourt——"

Before he could get any further Shortland interrupted her.

"All right, girl! I'll come at once."

He was out of his chair and making for the door before he finished speaking, but as he went he was acutely conscious of the sudden flame of curiosity in the keen eyes of his host, and guessed that the name so innocently announced might prove an almost disastrous revelation.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE FOG

IN the passage he found Sybil. She wore a coat with the fur collar turned up as he had seen her on the previous night, but she was without hat and drops of moisture glistened in the wavy hair. Her face was very pale, her eyes feverishly bright, her lips tremulous with emotion. All that he saw in a single glance as he moved towards her.

“You want me,” he said simply. “I am at your service. What——”

She flashed a look of warning, and not till then did he become aware of the maid standing near her, eyes wide open with curiosity.

“Yes,” he said, understanding. “Pardon me. I will return in a moment.”

He went back to his host and made his apology.

“I am afraid you must excuse me, Mr. Harlowe. There is someone here who needs me. I am sorry, but there is nothing else for it; I must go at once.”

“Yes,” replied the other in an enigmatic tone. “If Miss a—er—Lyncourt—did I really catch the name aright?”

“You did,” replied Shortland, in as level a voice as he could command. Then he added impulsively: “Perhaps I ought to explain——”

“Why?”

The question was like the snap of a pistol, and

Shortland found it infinitely disconcerting. For a moment he stood tongue-tied, reddening under the older man's steadfast gaze. Then desiring to ease an awkward situation he began :

“ To-morrow, if you are here——”

“ I shall be here,” interjected the other with an odd laugh. “ This quiet place grows in interest. . . . But the lady waits. Please do not worry about me. I shall find my solitude conducive to reflection.”

Of that, as he hurried to the waiting girl, Guy Shortland entertained no doubt whatever, and the thought of the conclusion to which reflection might lead the man, troubled him profoundly. But he had other things to occupy his mind, and for the present he thrust the disturbing thought aside for the immediate demand. The hurricane lantern he had brought with him stood in the vestibule, and after slipping on his outdoor coat and cap, he lit it, saw that it burned clearly, then spoke to the girl.

“ Now, Miss Lyncourt.”

They passed outside, and as the door closed behind them, were completely enveloped in the mist. The lantern at his feet showed a faint yellow glow and no more, the girl at his side was a mere shadow.

“ Phew ! ” he whistled. “ How did you find your way here ? ”

“ I had an electric torch. . . . But I dropped it outside your house and broke the bulb.”

“ Which way do we go now ? ”

“ The footpath to Newbridge.”

“ This way then, Miss Lyncourt. Perhaps you

had better take my arm. We shall not lose each other then."

The girl slipped her arm into his, and as he felt its light weight, Guy Shortland warmed with a pleasant sense of intimacy, and waited for her to offer an explanation of her coming. It was a full minute before she spoke, then she asked abruptly :

"Mr. Shortland, do you think Mr. Harlowe is alive?"

The question was utterly unexpected. It startled and flurried him a little. He did not know what to answer.

"I—er—why do you ask?"

"Please answer me," she said tersely. "I want the truth."

"Well?" he answered. "I think it is very possible."

"Do you know? . . . I mean do you know beyond all question?"

He hesitated to reply. He had promised the man whom he had known as Harlowe to keep the secret of his escape, and since it was possible that the man's life might hang upon his silence the promise was not to be lightly broken. Before doing so he must have sufficient reason, and so far he had none.

"Miss Lyncourt," he said earnestly, "before I answer you I really must know why you ask. Believe me it is not idle curiosity that prompts the demand."

"Then if you must know—I ask, because I have

been told that he is alive, that his name is not Harlowe but Lyncourt, that he is my father, and that he is in danger of being hanged."

The words came in a rush, her voice shaking with tumultuous emotion, and then ended in a sob. He felt her quivering, and divined that it needed but a straw to break her down completely. He himself was shaken with indignation, as he thought that someone must have flung the truth at her brutally, but repressing it he asked quietly :

" Who told you all that ? "

" Arthur Stoodley."

" Ah ! Arthur Stoodley. I might have guessed."

" He showed me an Australian paper with an account of an old bushranging crime, for which three men were sent to prison for twenty years, whilst the fourth—Dan Lyncourt—who shot two men, escaped. He says these three men are the men who went to the bungalow, and that Mr. Harlowe, whom they went to kill, is Dan Lyncourt—and my father ; that they did not kill him, though I thought I saw him dead in his chair when I went there—"

She broke off, and shivered at the remembrance, and again Shortland caught the sound of a choking sob.

" Steady, Miss Lyncourt," he said quietly. " You must not give way. As a matter of fact you were mistaken in supposing that Mr. . . . Harlowe . . . shall we still say ? . . . was dead. He was very much alive, though those ruffians thought they had

killed him. I myself drove him into Plymouth—and promised him that I would keep the secret, which is why I did not tell you the truth yesterday——”

“Oh! I knew there was something that you did not tell me.”

“Which shows what a poor dissembler I am. But please continue. Stoodley had some private reason for telling you all this?”

“Yes. . . . He said that he could save my . . . Mr. Harlowe from both these men . . . and . . . and—the hangman——”

“On conditions, I suppose?”

“Y-yes!”

“Here is the stile. Suppose I go first. I can hold the lantern for you.”

He climbed the stile to the field-path, and then held the lantern that she might see, and at the same time glimpsed her face through the fog. It was very pale, and her eyes were full of trouble. He waited until she had crossed the stile, and then as they moved forward, arm in arm again, he asked his question.

“I presume that his condition is that you marry him? Am I right?”

“Yes.”

The word came quiveringly, and the arm in his shook, whilst the little hand gripped his sleeve convulsively.

“I thought so,” he commented quietly. “To exploit another’s trouble for his own advantage is precisely what Mr. Stoodley would do. He is a

mere blackmailer. On no account must you listen to him. He——”

“ But are the things true ? ” she interjected. “ Is Mr. Harlowe that man—Dan Lyncourt ? . . . Tell me.”

He was in a quandary. Without any doubt whatever that the answer might be given in the affirmative, he had no certain evidence of the truth, and temporised.

“ It may be so, Miss Lyncourt.”

“ Oh ! ” The words broke from her in a tragic whisper. “ Then if the police find him they will hang him ? ”

“ If they find him—possibly. . . . But why should they find him ? If the worst is true, it is worth while remembering that for rather more than twenty years he has escaped detection, and I imagine very few people ever remember him.”

“ These three men remembered—and found him ? ”

“ But how did they find him ? ” he asked sharply. “ Have you thought of that ? ”

“ I—I do not understand ? ”

“ It is very simple,” he answered. “ For twenty years and more Lyncourt has eluded the police. They do not know where he is. They think that he must be dead. At any rate they long ago ceased to worry about him. . . . Then come these three men fresh from prison. Having been out of touch with him all these years, and shut from communication from the world, they find him almost immediately.

That is a very odd thing when you consider it. There is only one explanation of it——”

“ Yes ? ” she asked quickly as he paused. “ Yes ? ”

“ Well, assuming the identity of David Harlowe with Dan Lyncourt, someone who knew the truth betrayed him to these ruffians almost as soon as they stepped from the prison gates. It must have been so. There can be no other explanation.”

“ But who would do such a thing ? ” she asked. “ Who could know ? ”

“ Who was likely to know, Miss Lyncourt ? ”

“ I cannot think.”

“ It must have been someone who was in close association with him, who knew him both as Lyncourt and Harlowe, and the number of such people must be very small. Indeed, I can think of only one or two——”

“ My guardian ! ” she interrupted with a gasp of surprise.

“ There is another possibility, and that is Arthur Stoodley. From what you tell me he knows what we may presume to be the truth. How he learned it is another matter, since it is not likely he could have known Lyncourt in the old days. . . . But he shares the knowledge with your guardian, and neither of them, I think, was surprised by the attack and destruction of the bungalow. I gathered that from words I overheard. . . . One of them, it is certain, passed the information of Mr. Harlowe’s whereabouts. And if the police find him now——”

He broke off sharply as a new thought occurred to

him. That man at the Church House Inn? Had his advent there been quite as casual as he had implied? Or had he, like the ex-convicts, received information that had brought him there hot-foot to complete his task of over twenty years ago? That was more than possible, and it was a contingency to be faced. The man had been apparently very frank, and had spoken with something akin to grateful admiration of Warrego Dan, but all that might be a handful of dust thrown in his own eyes, and if it were so—

His thought was broken by the girl's voice, urgent and beseeching.

"Yes? Mr. Shortland. If the police find him now—what? What?"

"Well, Miss Lyncourt, it will mean that the man or men who betrayed him to his old confederates have also betrayed him to the police."

"Oh!" she broke in. "Mr. Bayhurst, if he knew, would not do that. You do not understand. He and Mr. Harlowe are great friends."

"You think so! And he wants you to marry Arthur Stoodley, who alternatively must be the betrayer. . . . By-the-by, did Mr. Harlowe know that?"

"I do not think so."

"No! Then Bayhurst concealed from him a most important thing—assuming you are his daughter—a thing on which surely he should have been consulted. Why? I ask myself. I can see the answer only dimly—no more than a conjecture.

But I will give it you for what it is worth. Suppose Arthur Stoodley, who apparently is not above blackmailing you into marriage, having knowledge of something discreditable about Mr. Bayhurst, has blackmailed him into agreement and consent?"

"But, Mr. Shortland——" began the girl protestingly.

"It is not so wild as it sounds," he broke in sharply. "Believe me, I think it is very possible. This very night I have heard something which puts Arthur Stoodley outside the pale, and which reveals him as capable of any infernal meanness—if it offers profit to himself."

He broke off, stopped in his walk, and then said with whispered vehemence: "Miss Lyncourt, you must not marry Arthur Stoodley at any cost, not even to save your father. . . . I think that if the latter knew what was being urged on you he would throw Stoodley into the river, or break his neck, both of which things the scoundrel richly deserves. You must not listen to him. He is not fit to dust your shoes. He is not what he seems. He is an utter scoundrel——"

"But how do you know?"

"I learned it from the man with whom I was dining at the Church House to-night. He knew Stoodley's father. He knows of the fellow's rascally activities. He——"

"But who is the man?" she interrupted again.

"Well," answered Guy Shortland, slowly. "He

calls himself David Harlowe, and he is a retired inspector of the Queensland Police."

"David Harlowe!" the girl echoed in amazement. "But—" She checked herself, assailed by some new thought and cried in a panic. "Of the Queensland Police. Then he knows. Arthur Stoodley is right. My father is in great danger. That man has come to arrest him. For what else should he come here when there is not another visitor in the neighbourhood?" She broke off, then whispered sobbingly: "Oh! What shall I do? I cannot let him—be—be—"

She shirked the word, and Guy Shortland did not ask what it was. Instead, he lifted the lantern until the light shone on her face. The hazel eyes were bright with tears, the beautiful mouth was quivering with the stress of emotion, her face in the clouded light had a strange pallor. He found her distress infinitely moving, and the appeal went to his heart as she whispered again, brokenly.

"Oh! what . . . what shall I do?"

He lowered the lantern and answered her brusquely: "You must not marry Stoodley—"

"But Mr. Harlowe—my father—"

"Do you think he would have that sacrifice? . . . Not at any cost to himself. He may have committed crimes, but he is a bigger man than that—and generous! I know. That man at the Church House spoke of him almost with admiration, and is indebted to him for his life; unless he is a smooth, hypocritical liar, which I can't

believe. . . . Think ! Assuming all this is true, why has your father never claimed you ? Why does he let Henry Bayhurst pose as your guardian—and deny himself of your company ? . . . There can be but one reason. For your sake he has laid on himself this self-denying ordinance. Do you think he would see you sacrifice yourself ? I tell you if he knew Stoodley he would go cheerfully to the gallows first."

"But I would not let him !" answered Sybil, with a quick pride. "What girl who knew the truth would ? I would marry Arthur Stoodley a hundred times rather than see my father . . . suffer. I have not known him as my father, but always he has loved me. . . . I see things now with understanding—and—" She interrupted herself, and then added : "I came to you to learn the truth. I was sure you would tell me, and now I shall go back and give Arthur Stoodley his answer."

"His answer ?" he asked tensely.

"Yes," was the reply in a voice of stony calm. "I shall tell him that if my father is saved—I will marry—"

"My God ! But you shall not !" cried Shortland, and wondered at his own passion.

"I shall not ? You say that I—"

He lifted the lantern again, until it lit her face and his own.

"Look at me, Miss Lyncourt !"

She looked at him with surprise shining in her

hazel eyes, but as she met his gaze the pallor of her face was overwhelmed by a sudden surge of blood. He saw it sweep from neck to chin and from chin to brow, then he laughed with a touch of exultation.

“ You understand ? ” It was an assertion as much as a question. “ I have known you two days. What matter ? I do not mean that you shall marry Stoodley. All other things apart, I would fight against that, even if he were a saint rather than a slimy serpent, poisoning life. Why ? . . . Is there need to answer ? Look at me, Sybil ! . . . Tell me is there any need ? ”

She looked at him once, meeting his eyes in a straight gaze, then before the flame in them, her gaze wavered and again the warm blood ran in her face.

“ Is there any need for words ? ” he asked again. “ If so I will speak them. . . . Answer me ? ”

“ There . . . is . . . no need.”

The reply came in a tremulous whisper, and as he lowered the lantern, setting it on the ground, he caught her quick breathing.

“ So ! ” he said. “ You understand ? ” Then he laughed. “ Do you know, sweetheart——”

“ Sweetheart ! ” she gasped.

“ Since a moment ago,” he laughed again. “ You know it—without words. But you do not know what I was about to tell you, that yesterday I was sworn to your service by your father ? ”

“ By my father ! ”

“ Yes—by David Harlowe. He had fears for you.

He was thinking of those three gaol birds. . . . I imagine he did not know of Arthur Stoodley——”

“ And you did not know of Dan Lyncourt ? ”

“ You think that might make a difference ? ”

He laughed as he asked the question. “ I have known about the real Dan Lyncourt for at least four hours. When that man at the Church House gave me his name I knew—in my heart I knew ! And ever since I have been thinking of you. How I might serve you—help you. Now I know the way. It was Fate sent you through the mist to find me to-night. . . . Your coming has forced the pace and saved an infinity of trouble. . . . You are Dan Lyncourt’s daughter ! ” He laughed lightly. “ Well . . . when will you marry me ? ”

“ When will I marry——”

“ The common fate. Reached by an uncommon way.”

“ Oh, but I cannot——”

“ You can and must ! ” he said masterfully. “ Give me your hand. . . . No ! Not that ! The other—the one I bound—oh ! ages ago.”

His energy, his passion, were compelling. She yielded him the hand, and he set it to his lips.

“ To-morrow I shall buy a ring, but to-night, sweeting, to-night you shall give me your promise.”

“ But——”

“ Sybil ! ”

His arm enfolded her, protectingly, but with a lover’s passion. She could not resist, had indeed no desire. She made a little movement not unlike a

child burying its face in a guardian's shoulder, and then with both arms around her he kissed her. A second later he stiffened to alertness, head raised and ears straining. The sound of footsteps came through the mist. A voice followed.

"Diable ! Ah say dey come dees ways ! Ah follow zee girl to zee hotel, an' Ah follow both dees way—"

"Curse the fog !" interrupted a harsher voice.
"Even the trees are hidden."

He felt the girl shiver in his arms, and whispered in her ear.

"Quiet ! Don't speak ! Don't move."

He released her and stooped for the lantern. It made but a little circle of yellow light in the fog, but to the men seeking them it might prove a beacon. His fears were justified. Just as he found the swing handle he heard the Frenchman's voice again.

"Tiens ! Dere ! He was a lantern carrying—"

"Quick !" he whispered, almost pushing her from him. Make for the bridge—as quietly as a ghost. I will be there." He heard a gasp, a slight rustle in the grass and she was gone, then he listened intently. The soft plunk of heavy feet on the turf behind told him what he wished to know, and deliberately he began to march at right angles to the path Sybil had taken. A voice came out of the mist.

"By God ! There !"

The plunk of feet grew clearer. The men who sought him—or Sybil—were running. He also ran

quietly as he could, trying to keep his sense of direction in the confusing fog. Out of the opaque-ness behind him sounded a brutal laugh. The pounding feet were gaining on him, their owners having nothing to think of but their quarry ; whilst he had to think of the way back, of Sybil waiting for him at the bridge. His feet caught some tangling thing, a bramble bush as he saw by the lantern's light. It would serve as well as anything. Swiftly he thrust the lantern into it, then made a three-quarter turn to the left and slid silently across the turf. He never saw his pursuers but he heard them pass in the fog, and before he had got very far caught a shout of rage.

“Diddled, by heck ! . . . Run, you blighters. They'll have to cross the bridge.”

He reproached himself as he ran. Why had he told Sybil to wait for him ? She might have got ahead whilst he misled the pursuit. As it was he must go to her, for now the rascally trio must inevitably find her if she waited for him. He lost his way in the mist, stopped to listen for the river, heard it on his right when it should have been on his left, and turning about face, ran on again. In the opaqueness just ahead a nebulous blur appeared. It puzzled him for a moment, then the meaning of it flashed upon him. It was the lantern, and the three ex-convicts were in front of him. They were nearing the road now, and he could not possibly get in front of them. He listened. Quite plainly came the swirl of the river. The night was very still

and despite the muffling fog a shout would be heard by anyone at the bridge. That it must be heard by the men in front of him troubled him not at all. That was a fact he welcomed, since it would draw their attention to himself. Deliberately he cupped his hands and shouted at the top of his voice.

“Run, Sybil! Run! Don’t wait!”

“*Diable!* Zee fool ees behind zee back of us!”

The voice was closer than he had thought the three men could be. The yellow blur seemed suddenly very near. It was coming towards him as he turned to run.

“*Perdition!*”

The ejaculation of surprise might have been shouted in his ear, so near was it. That did not worry him.

So long as the attention of the russians was diverted from Sybil all was well, and he could run with the best—He blundered unexpectedly and violently into the hedge. There was a shout, a laugh behind him, then as he tried to recover himself, something crashed on his head, and as he went down he heard a splintering of glass, and guessed that the lantern had been used to fell him. The light was extinguished by the smashing blow, and he tried to roll clear of his assailant, but banged against a pair of hurrying feet, the owner of which stumbling, fell on him, and promptly grappled him.

“Got the blighter!” the man shouted triumphantly. “Here, Victor! This way, Dandy!”

CHAPTER X

PERILOUS MOMENTS

THE other two men rushed to the help of their comrade ; and realising the vanity of struggling against three men, who would not hesitate to use ruthless means to silence him, Guy Shortland lay still. One of his assailants produced a flash-light and turning the light to his face examined him. Then he laughed.

“ Victor’s right. It’s the fool he knocked out yesterday.”

“ But where ees zee Miss ? ”

“ Lord knows ! You heard this sheep shout to her to run. She’ll be half a mile away by this time ; and to go hunting for her in this fog would be mere dam’ folly. We’d break our necks or fall into the river, as like as not.”

“ Yes, Soulsby, that’s true. But this beggar can maybe tell us what we want to know. It won’t take much to make him squeal, I’ll warrant.”

“ Maybe not ! But we can’t do the business here. Somebody might happen along. Better take him to the roosting place. We can do what we like with him there, and take our own time over it.”

“ *Oui.* But we must zee fool tie up,” said the man André. “ He too much interfere in our business, an’ eef he made zee bolt, we not catch heem again.”

"Then tie him up, you two, and gag him. There are precious few to hear him on this country-side; but if he were to howl he might bring a keeper down this way."

"But yes," laughed André. "He shall be gagged so dat he can not whisper even his prayers."

The gagging was done pretty thoroughly with a couple of handkerchiefs, a belt was used to fasten his arms behind his back; then he was jerked to his feet, and the man who had been addressed as Soulsby, gave him curt warning.

"Run or try any tricks—and I'll bash your head. . . . Now march!"

There was nothing else for it. With a ruffian on either side of him and the third almost treading on his heels, he moved forward. Hooting owls, the occasional bark of a fox, the squeal of a trapped rabbit and the ripple of the Dart were the only sounds. In the dense fog there was nothing to be seen; and rendered dumb, he had no hope from any chance encounter, since in so lonely a district there would be few pedestrians; and any whom they met must pass by unaware of his plight. As it befell, they encountered no one. They struck the road and made the bridge, and as they did so, Shortland was assailed by acute anxiety.

Had Sybil heard him and obeyed, or did she still linger here waiting for him? He tried to pierce the fog which was very dense over the water; but he could see nothing; and not until they reached the flat on the farther side of the bridge did he draw

breath. Sybil was not there ; so no doubt by this she was well on her way to the lodge. Relieved of immediate anxiety on her account he was able to give attention to his own plight. What the purpose of his captors was he could only conjecture. From the words that had been spoken it seemed clear that they thought he was in possession of information that might be useful to them, and they proposed to make him speak. What the desired information might be he did not know, but he guessed that it had to do with Sybil or her father, or possibly her guardian. It was however no use worrying about that until the need arose ; and he set himself to discover, if possible, where his captors were now taking him.

So long as they kept the road there was no difficulty. The sharp ascent to Poundsgate was easy to recognise even in the fog, but before the hamlet was reached they swung off in what was plainly a by-road, and which for the moment he could not recall. Along this road, much rougher than the main highway, the whole party stumbled for some ten minutes, at the end of which time from the man behind came a sudden warning.

“Hist, boys !”

The man on either side of Shortland halted abruptly, pulling him up at the same time.

“What the blazes——” began the man Soulsby.

“Listen !” whispered the one who had given the warning.

The three men stood perfectly still, and Shortland

himself listened with straining ears. Near at hand there was the drip ! drip ! of moisture from some bush or tree ; from further away, much subdued by the fog, sounded the ripple and rush of the river ; but no other sound broke the stillness. They stood for what seemed a very long time, then the man Soulsby spoke in a growling undertone.

“ What maggot’s in your head, Jim ? ”

“ I’d have sworn I heard someone following us.”

“ Imagination ! ” retorted the other. “ You were always one to fancy things an’——” He broke off sharply as through the fog there came the whinnying of a pony, followed by the soft thud of unshodden feet on the road behind them. Then he laughed. “ There’s your follower, Jim—one of the moorland ponies. Don’t you go getting the wind up because a little gee-gee shifts its feeding ground.”

They moved forward again, and after another four minutes or so the man Soulsby halted them again.

“ Somewhere about here. Show a glim, Jim. This cursed fog makes things bad to find.”

The man behind stepped forward, carrying a flashlight, and directing it to the right, began to search about. Presently he called out.

“ Right Soulsby ! The gate is here.”

They left the rough road for a deeply rutted track, passed through a gateway where the broken gate hanging ajar compelled them to move in single file, and half a minute later Shortland became aware of a shadow in the fog ahead, which proclaimed a house or building of some kind. One of the trio

produced a key, a well-oiled lock clicked, and all four entered the building. As the door shut behind him, with the peculiar echoing clang which proclaims an empty house, Shortland looked hastily round him.

He was standing in a stone-flagged passage, with mildewed walls; almost immediately in front of him a flight of rickety, uneven stairs; whilst to the right was a door leading to some room, and sagging on its hinges. Fallen plaster, all the dirt and débris of an abandoned house sinking to ruin, littered the flags, whilst the fusty odour of decay assailed his nostrils. So much he had time to notice, when the man Soulsby led the way towards the stairs and began to ascend them. The Frenchman indicated the stairs to Shortland, and gave him a push.

“ March, my jewel ! ”

Shortland, able neither to argue nor resist, marched; and a minute later was thrust into an upper chamber, where Soulsby was already putting a match to a cheap paraffin lamp. As the wick caught, the man blew out the match, put the chimney in place, turned up the wick, and as the lamp gave rather murky illumination, Shortland looked swiftly round.

This upper chamber was as decrepit as the passage below. Dust and mortar littered the uneven flooring, a rotting paper was peeling from the walls, and the glass was gone from the window, which however was boarded up on the outside. The sole furniture

in the room consisted of a cheap deal table, three windsor chairs, a small oil stove, the lamp, and a little heap of blankets tumbled carelessly in a corner. On the table was a bottle three parts full of whisky, a brown earthenware jug, and three tin cups. There was, so far as he could see, nothing else in the room. The man Soulsby, who appeared to exercise some sort of leadership, took one of the chairs and spoke to the Frenchman.

“Light the stove, André. That infernal fog outside has given me the shivers.”

The Frenchman lit the stove as requested, and whilst he did so, Shortland looked round again. He was as he guessed in some deserted house—a derelict farm, probably; abandoned by its owner after a despairing fight against the ever encroaching heather and gorse. It was possibly remote from any other homestead on the moor, and like most deserted homes of the sort unvisited by anyone in the neighbourhood. His roving eyes caught something hanging from an iron hook screwed into a beam—a short piece of rope, from which in turn broken cobwebs hung. The man Soulsby noted the direction of his eyes, and gave a grim laugh.

“A handy hook!” he said. “The last owner of this place hanged himself from it one winter’s night, fourteen years back, leastways that’s the yarn I heard at the Tavistock Inn. . . . The place is reputed haunted; so there’s no fear of us being disturbed on a night like this, when even ghosts won’t move abroad.”

He laughed again, helped himself to whisky, watered it a very little from the jug ; then pushing the bottle towards the man Jim, who had seated himself by the table, gave another order to André.

“ Unmuzzle the gentleman, Victor. No doubt he is burning to unburden his mind.”

The Frenchman removed the gag, and as it dropped away Shortland took a deep breath of relief, and with measuring eyes considered his captors. Soulsby had a hard-bitten look. His lean, long-jawed face was pitted with pock-marks, his eyes, light coloured, were the coldest that Shortland had ever seen. The man Jim was of a different type, handsome in a haggard way, with tight-curled hair sprinkled with grey, and surprisingly neat—indeed almost finicky in appearance ; whilst André, iron-grey, dark-skinned, with a slight dark moustache, had piercing eyes, in which an evil light danced. As he considered the three, Shortland decided that, to him, the Frenchman might prove the most dangerous. The man was impulsive, prone to gusts of passion, with the callousness of the apache, unless Harlowe had been mistaken. Soulsby would be coldly ruthless, but André would kill for pleasure, and was the man to be most watched. Whilst he was so thinking, the former began to speak in a rasping voice.

“ Now Mr.—What’s-yer-name, I’m going to ask you a question or two, and if you’ve sense you’ll answer prompt, an’ no lies. . . . That hook there is handy for hanging a man, as you’ll see.”

The last words were spoken quietly, without heat

or any hint of violence except such as they themselves held ; but Shortland knew that the threat they conveyed was very real, and that decrepit room seemed to become shadowed by brooding peril. He shivered at the implied threat, but making no reply, waited for the man to begin his catechism. For a moment the fellow seemed in doubt as to where to start, then suddenly he jerked.

“ What’s yo’r name ? ”

“ Guy Shortland.”

“ Um ! Never heard it b’fore ! . . . ” The man considered again then shot his next question : “ What’s the name of that girl you were with just now ? ”

“ Don’t you know ? I thought—— ”

“ What’s the name ? ” asked the man harshly, with a glance at the hook with its severed rope.

“ Sybil Lyncourt,” answered Shortland, knowing that he was telling the man no more than he already knew.

“ Daughter of Dan Lyncourt, I guess ? ”

“ I know no gentleman calling himself by that name,” replied Shortland, quietly.

“ Liar ! ” There was a sudden heat in the man’s voice and a flame of anger in the cold eyes.

“ I assure you that is the truth ! ”

The man Jim moved his chair forward a yard and whispered to Soulsby, who nodded and addressed himself to Shortland anew.

“ Know anybody who calls himself David Harlowe, then ? ”

Shortland saw his opportunity and took it. "Yes," he said frankly; "I have met a man of that name—a thin, wizened man, with a limp, who is a retired inspector of the Queensland Police Force."

The effect of his words was surprising. Had someone fired a pistol unexpectedly the men could not have been more startled. The man André slipped a single word expressive of his amazement.

"*Diable!*"

The one known as Jim rose sharply from his chair and stared wildly at Shortland in an extremity of surprise; whilst Soulsby leaning forward was for a moment dumb, then broke out savagely.

"Holy blazes! What's that you say?"

"I said that I have met a David Harlowe, late inspector of the Queensland Police——"

"Where did you meet him—an' when? Quick, fool!"

"He was examining that burned-out bungalow this afternoon——"

"The devil he was!"

There was consternation in the words, in the man's demeanour; and it was shared by his companions, for the Frenchman cried out something unintelligible, whilst the third man spat a sharp oath and added:

"I reckon it's time to quit, Soulsby."

The man whom he addressed recovered himself a little.

"No hurry, Dandy. Keep yo'r fur on. We've got to get to the bottom of this." He turned to their prisoner. "Now Mr. Shortland, just let's get

this clear. You met David Harlowe this afternoon up by that bungalow ; how did you know he was an inspector of the Queensland Police ? ”

“ He told me so. The fog was coming down and he gave me a lift in his car, and on the way we chatted as men will.”

“ Did he say what he was doing up there ? ”

“ He was looking for a namesake, he said. A long-lost cousin——”

“ Long lost hell ! ” broke in the man at Soulsby’s side. “ He’s trailing Dan ! . . . An’ if he finds out——”

“ Shut up, fool . . . Where is he now ? ”

Shortland did not hesitate. If he said that Harlowe was in the immediate neighbourhood, it was likely that there would be tragic happenings. He shook his head.

“ I can’t say. He gave me a lift, as I explained —as any stranger might. . . . A curious thing happened on the way down though. We were passing the Tavistock Inn and he caught the sound of a man’s voice, disputing with the landlord over some change.”

“ *Dieu !* ” cried André.

“ The voice seemed to be reminiscent of one he knew, he explained to me ; and after we had driven on a little way, he pulled up the car and went back on foot to make sure of——”

“ *Diable !* He saw zee man ? ”

“ No ! The man—some Italian labouring on the waterworks he said—had gone.”

"You, André?"

"Oui!"

"An' he remembered after all these blessed years!"

"*Mon Dieu!* But Ah also remembaire!"

There was passion in the man's voice. His dark face was convulsed, and Shortland was glad that he had concealed the Inspector's whereabouts, and relieved that apparently these men did not suspect him of knowing it.

"Steady, Victor," said Soulsby. "There's no need to get into a tear about it. We know what to look out for, an' the business will keep till we get the shekels we're after." The man turned sharply to Shortland. "Know anything of Henry Bayhurst up at that swagger house in the trees?"

"Little enough! I have met him once. Miss Lyncourt is his ward."

"His ward, hey? . . . Well I'm sorry for her! . . . An' who is the flash young fellow staying up there with him?"

"You mean Arthur Stoodley?"

"That's the man?"

"He's from Australia. . . . He is a suitor for Miss Lyncourt's hand."

"Wants to marry her you mean?"

"Yes."

The man appeared to ponder over the reply for some time. At any rate there was quite a long interval before further questions, and in that interval Shortland found himself listening to slight sounds

which appeared to come from the other side of the door. The men around the table apparently did not hear them, or were too accustomed to them to give them any notice ; and he found the explanation of the sounds in rats or other vermin which would infest the place. Then came the next question, fired at him quite suddenly.

“ Why did that girl come to see you to-night ? ”

“ She came to tell me that Arthur Stoodley was pressing her to marry him, and that her guardian was favourable to the match.”

“ An’ you aren’t, hey ? ”

The man laughed shortly, and again considered, then in the same abrupt way shot another question.

“ Know who we three are ? ”

To have acknowledged the truth would have been to invite a short shift. Guy Shortland knew that and denied the knowledge with amazing calm.

“ Haven’t an idea ! ”

“ Liar ! ” the man burst out explosively. “ Last night I heard you tell that girl that we had fired the bungalow. You did tell her that, didn’t you ? ”

There was no use denying what was undeniable. The men hidden in the shrubbery had overheard him, and the safe thing was to maintain an air of frankness.

“ Yes ! . . . But that doesn’t mean I know anything about you.”

“ No ! ” the man sneered. “ But how did you know we fired that house ? ”

“ Well, I saw you leaving. You were in a hurry, and that man there ”—he indicated André—“ was

in a panic when I challenged him, and a little while after the house was burning. It seemed a safe guess that——”

“ You’d better not have guessed, fool ! ”

The man’s interruption, terse and cold, rang with menace. Shortland knew in that moment that he had owned too much, and was aware of a little clutch of despair at his heart. The trio were callous villains, and if the thought occurred to the men that his existence jeopardised their safety they would be ruthless, they would not spare him. The hook with its broken rope began to exercise a quite horrible fascination. It drew his eyes willy-nilly, and Soulsby, noticing his glance, laughed callously, and then beckoned to his companions.

They huddled over the table in whispered conference, and it was not difficult for Shortland to guess that they were discussing himself. A moment later he was assured of the fact, for a whispered question of the man Jim reached his straining ears.

“ But what’s to be done with the spy, Soulsby ? ”

Guy Shortland caught his breath at the question. For him the crisis was rapidly approaching ; and with mounting apprehension he strove to catch the reply. It was in a tone so low that he could not hear, but a second later he was made aware of its purport by the Frenchman, who broke out in open protest.

“ Zee river ! *Non !* Dat ees too dam’ far. Een zee fog maybe we fall een ourselves.”

“ Then what——”

“ Ah say tie zee beggaire up. Dat hook dere

ees—how you say, Soulsby?—handy. *Oui!* Dat ees zee word, an Ah haf nevaire seen a man hanged."

"But man——"

"We string him up, with zee knot under zee right ear, and we leave him so. But presently perhaps he ees found, or maybe not. What mattaire? He ees not found, *bon!* He ees zee ghost of this ghostly house. Or he ees found—then he ees zee man sick of life who haf come to this lonely house to die . . . Eet ees all vaire simple."

To Guy Shortland it was more than simple, and he shivered at the dreadful prospect before him. Then unexpectedly there was opposition to the brutal proposal. It came from Dandy Jim.

"I'm against you Victor. Tie the fool up, yes, just as tight as you like. I'm for that all the time. He ain't safe running round loose till we quit; an' maybe not then. But I'm dead against stringing him up. For why? you asks. Well, we're just out of a twenty years stretch—an' lucky at that. We shaved the rope over that Wallaby Hill affair, an' I'm not for asking for it now, by an unnecessary killing——"

"But you forget, *mon ami*," interrupted André, with a harsh laugh. "Already a man haf been killed——"

"Warrego Dan! Well, I didn't do the killing!"

"Diable! You mean dat Ah did? Well, dat ees no mattaire. You are—what do you name it? *le complice*——"

"Accessory!" grunted Soulsby.

“Oui! Dat ees zee word. Dat was zee word dat lawyer use twenty years ago when he would haf us hang together; an’ now eet ees zee same.”

“And who’s to blame for that, André? You! As you were twenty years since, though then we shifted the blame to Dan Lyncourt.”

“What dat mattaire? We talk of zee present. I shoot Warrego Dan, an’ together we burn heem een hees house—all of us! So we all hang if we aire caught. An’ dis ees zee man dat know! He haf told us so. Eet ees not safe for our necks heem to leave. *Non!*”

“Tie him up——”

“*Oui!* to zee hook! Dere are dree of us. We all put a hand een zee pie, dat make sure dat we stand or fall een one piece. Eet ees bettaire dat way than for one stick heem with a knife—un’ as Ah say, Ah haf nevaire seen a man hanged.”

“You’ve a d—d gruesome mind, André!” growled the other, plainly yielding ground.

“Maybe! But we do zee safe ting. . . . Somebody say zee river, Ah say eet ees far to go; an’ eef we meet any man an’ are seen eet ees dangerous. We haf zee luck coming up; but going down, perhaps we are vaire unlucky—An’ dere ees dat girl! She t’ink something haf happen; maybe she tell what she fear; an’ men come to look for dis man—what you do den? *Non!* We hang heem to dat hook like zee sheep he ees, an’ dere he stay till zee house fall down maybe, an’ eef not, he haf die of heemself. Dat ees zee good way.”

"Well, maybe you're right. But where's the rope?"

André laughed. "Eet ees provided. We t'ink we take dat girl; an' to-day Ah purchase a washin' line, to tie her with. Eet ees below. Ah go bring eet without delay. Zee flash-light, *mon ami*."

Soulsby passed the flash-lamp, and with utter despair surging in him, Shortland watched André as he moved to the door. There was little hope for him, he was assured. The Frenchman was what Lyncourt had called him—a wolf, and the other at least hunted with him. But one of them—the man Jim—might listen to a desperate appeal if André were out of the way. The Frenchman reached the door, fumbled with the old-fashioned latch, then opened it. As he did so he stopped dead. A gasp came from him, then a long shuddering sound—half moan, half a cry of stark terror.

"O-o-o-u-u-g-h!"

No one in the room could see beyond the door, but the inarticulate cry was so startling, so expressive of pure terror, that the man's two companions leaped to their feet.

"In God's name what—" began Soulsby, but got no further.

André had dropped the flashlight and was backing into the room, his hands held out, arms full stretch as if to fend off some awful thing.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he screamed, "*C'est un fantôme!*"

Shortland, his own fears momentarily forgotten, caught sight of the man's face. It was working in

a paroxysm of fear, the eyes had a fixed stare, the brutal mouth was quivering pitifully—the whole man was a shrinking, shaking bundle of terror. Then something moved on the landing, came into line with the open doorway, and before Shortland had made the recognition, an incredulous shout came from Soulsby.

“Lyncourt! By the powers!”

The crack of a pistol in the doorway followed the words. The lamp glass shattered and the light went out leaving the room in complete darkness save for radiant bars on the ceiling thrown up from the stove. A hand gripped Shortland’s pinioned arm and a voice whispered in his ear.

“Sharp! This way!”

He stumbled towards the doorway, reached it with his rescuer close to his heels. The door slammed just as a shot sounded within. The man behind him swore softly but pushed him forward; then for a second a flashlight cut the darkness like a sword to show him the rickety stairs.

“Down you go. Don’t wait.”

The light went out as he touched the second stair; and he heard the door of the room he had left open, a pounding of feet, and above all a stentorian voice raised in warning.

“Back you scoundrels or——”

He missed his footing on the fourth stair; and helpless, owing to his pinioned arms, slithered the whole way to the stone passage below.

CHAPTER XI

AT THE LODGE

AT the bottom of the stairs, bruised and shaken, but otherwise unhurt Guy Shortland, rolled over, and with some difficulty picked himself up. Scarcely was he on his feet when his rescuer came hurriedly down the stairs, cannoned heavily against him ; then gave a hurried order.

“Open the door. Quick !”

“I can’t ! My arms are——”

“Lord ! I’d forgotten. There’s no time now for them. We must quit.”

The feet of their pursuers were on the stairs as Lyncourt himself opened the door and thrust the younger man across the threshold. He banged the door after them and gripped Shortland’s arm.

“This way ! Those scoundrels will be sure that we shall make for the road ; and they’ll never look for us under their noses.”

Shortland found himself hurried to the side of the house, and beyond to the rear, where in the shadow of a ruined shippon, and entirely hidden by the fog, they halted. The door in front of the house opened and the voices of men, with the sound of hurrying feet, reached them through the stillness and muffling fog.

“Straight for the road as I expected. There is

now time to unbind you, my friend. Wait until I find my knife."

"The binding is a strap with a buckle," explained Shortland.

"Good!" the other chuckled, and immediately began to grope for the buckle.

He found it after a moment's search, slid the tongue of the buckle from its hole, and as the buckle was loosed the strap was released and slid away.

"Arms numb, I daresay, Shortland. A little massage will set them right, but for heaven's sake do it quietly. I want to listen."

Shortland rubbed and stretched his arms, whilst the other moved to the corner of the shippon to listen. Out of the misty darkness came occasional shouts, but in a little time these became less frequent, fainter, and finally died away altogether. Then the man returned to him, and said with a laugh—

"Now we can quit. But we shall have to keep our ears wide open. I know those beauties. They've got the wind up pretty badly, and funk makes men desperate. I suppose you're going to Holne?"

"Not just yet! I want to go to Harford Lodge to make sure that your daughter is safe."

"My daughter?" There was an odd note in the man's voice.

"You believe what those scallywags said?"

"I believe what Sybil herself told me!"

"The deuce! Then she knows."

"She knows she is Dan Lyncourt's daughter, and you are Dan Lyncourt, aren't you?"

The man laughed harshly. "No use denying it to you after what happened back in that house, though I've hidden the fact for over twenty years."

For a little time they walked forward in silence, Lyncourt apparently in deep thought; then he laughed again, in a strained, mirthless way.

"That was a clever bluff you put up just now—about Dave Harlowe, I mean. I'd never have thought of giving facts a twist like that!"

"It wasn't a bluff," answered Shortland quietly. "It happened to be the truth, as I fancy you know. . . . I saw your face at the window above your garage when you were watching the man this afternoon."

"The devil you did? I never saw you."

"Possibly not."

"But Dave Harlowe never saw me? I'll lay my life on that."

"No. I am sure he didn't."

Again there was an interval of silence, during which they reached the main road, and as they turned into it, Lyncourt spoke again, a trifle bitterly.

"Harlowe must have wind of me, and means to get me after all these years. . . . The man is a regular sleuth-hound. There's nothing human about a policeman when he's on the job."

"I'm not so sure of that," answered Shortland quickly, desiring to ease the fears of one to whom unquestionably he owed his life. "I think it really was a mere accident that took him up to your

burned-out place, and that he had no idea that you were in this neighbourhood."

"But he knows now? You told him?"

"I didn't guess the truth until he gave his name and station, and I certainly told him nothing."

"But he knows—or suspects," persisted the other.

"I think that is fairly certain—now."

"Why?"

"Because of things that happened. You heard me telling about that incident at the Tavistock Inn. I don't know how far he believed the landlord's explanation about the Italian, but I should say he was sharp enough to know the difference between a French and Italian twist to English. That must have set him thinking. I myself recognised André's voice, though I didn't say so; and I don't fancy that Harlowe would really doubt his memory. Then there was another thing—I dined with him to-night and was chatting with him when Sybil came to the inn. She asked for me, and the maid gave her name—Miss Lyncourt——"

"Ah!"

"He guessed something then I am sure. Indeed he couldn't help doing so; for a moment before he had been talking about you, and the association was bound to be made."

"About me!"

"Nothing for you to worry over. He told me how you saved his life when he was trailing you, and—er—some other things not to your discredit. Indeed he showed a certain admiration that one

wouldn't expect from a police officer for—a——”

“A moonlighting bushranger! Don't worry about my feelings. I've outlived emotion on that score long ago, and a man can't go back in life. . . . There's one thing in the Bible that I guess is true and that is that bit about Red Esau, who could find no place for repentance though he sought it carefully with tears. . . . I'm through with that kind of thing, though a man can't shake off his past. . . . The only thing that troubles me to-day is Sybil. I don't want her to know——”

“Mr. Lyncourt . . . she knows!”

“Knows!” the man cried in a hoarse, choking voice, and stopped dead in his stride. “My God! . . . You told her just now?”

“No! But she'd been told. She came to ask me if it were true you were alive. She was in deep trouble. She was afraid lest you should be arrested——”

“But who's going to arrest me? . . . Dave Harlowe? My God!” His voice shook with surging passion. “Before that I'd kill——”

He got no further! Out of the fog behind sounded the hoot of an owl that came from no feathered throat. In front on the road there was the noise of running feet, and from the side a shadowy figure launched itself upon them. Lyncourt struck once and knocked the attacker sideways, but he came on again, with a shout that betrayed himself.

“*A moi!*”

“Right-ho!”

The second voice was that of the man Dandy Jim, and even as he shouted he came out of the fog like a charging bull. Shortland scarcely glimpsed him before the man grappled. For a moment they whirled to and fro, then the man set foot in the gutter at the side of the road, and went down with a crash. Probably his head struck a stone, for his grasp relaxed swiftly, and he lay quite still, utterly dazed or unconscious—Shortland could not see which. He picked himself up quickly and turned with the thought to help Lyncourt. But even as he did so the latter jumped back, and spat a swift warning and order.

“ ‘Ware knives. Quit ! I’ll know where to look for you.”

There was a sound of two men getting in each other’s way in the fog. A sharp oath followed, and Lyncourt laughed. “ Now ! ”

Shortland groped his way to the bank at the road side, scrambled up it and dropped into the pasture on the farther side, heard Lyncourt as he thought following, and waited. But instead of the man appearing over the bank there came the fog-muffled sound of feet flying up the road. Other feet followed a little way, stopped and returned, then from the further side of the bank came the growling voice of a bewildered man.

“ What the blazes——”

“ Get up, Jim ! We’ve missed ‘em again. . . . I daren’t shoot. ‘Tisn’t two hundred yards to the inn. We’d have had the whole village out——”

Shortland stayed to hear no more. The man unwittingly had told him his whereabouts ; and guessing that it was Lyncourt's idea that they should foregather in the Lodge grounds, he began to make his way thither, avoiding the road for the present, but keeping parallel with the bank. He found the fog bewildering without the crunch of gravel under his feet to guide him ; and following the bank as he thought, he presently found himself going down-hill when he should have been climbing, though as he ascertained by touch there was still a bank on his left hand.

He knew then that he must have come to a banked hedge and unconsciously turned at the corner. It was no use returning, he decided ; and accordingly felt his way carefully till he found a gate. He climbed this, and on the other side made a diagonal line across the slope, veering upward, thinking that so he would strike the outskirts of the Lodge grounds. He had nothing to guide him but the lie of the land, and the faint sound of the river somewhere below ; and in the Stygian gloom the going was difficult.

It would be better perhaps to walk straight up-hill to the road after all. There at any rate one would not go astray ; and probably the convict trio by this had given up their pursuit, completely. He half turned, then changed his mind, and under an odd compulsion that he could not have explained, continued on his former line. As he moved forward, soaked with the moisture on the sodden grass, he

stumbled on some sheep which, with frightened bleatings, scampered madly away, startling him considerably ; and at the next hedge again stumbled again over something that lay almost at his feet. He looked down. It was no sheep this time for it did not run, it was—

“ Good Heavens ! ”

He knew now the meaning of that unreasoning impulse which had kept him to the pasture instead of climbing upward to the road. It had been a predestined thing after all—for there at his feet lay Sybil Lyncourt in a dead faint. How long she had lain there he could only conjecture. Probably on hearing his shout she had fled from the bridge, had either missed the road or unwisely, but possibly with a thought of safety, taken a field-path and lost her way in the fog. He remembered his own encounter with the sheep. If she had stumbled among them the shock might have been too much for her, and—All this passed through his mind in a flash, the next moment he had gathered her in his arms as if she had been a child, and with her head against his shoulder moved forward as quickly as he dared, knowing that the sooner she was home the better.

As he marched, he foresaw difficulties. Doubtless Sybil had left the Lodge without announcing her going ; and for her to return, carried by a stranger, would provoke endless questions. That however could not be helped, and it was not beyond his wit to invent some plausible tale ; particularly as even

a sailor or a moorman could lose himself in so dense a fog.

He came to a wire fence, and caught the dripping of moisture from trees. His heart leapt at the sound. He had at any rate struck the bounds of the Lodge grounds, and at no great distance on the other side of the wire lay his immediate destination. To negotiate the wire he was forced to lower her on the farther side, whilst he himself climbed over; and as he stooped to take her in his arms again, he caught the sound of a long sigh. As he lifted her she stirred. Her body stiffened sharply and she gave a little cry.

"Steady, Sybil," he said, "it is I—Guy Shortland. There is nothing to fear."

At that assurance she lay still in his arms for a few paces, then asked in a wondering whisper:

"But how did you find me?"

"Purely by accident—which is a form of providence. I was on my way to the Lodge, to make sure you had arrived, when I stumbled on you by a hedge-side. How you got there I don't know. What happened after we parted?"

"I waited at the bridge till I heard you cry out, and then I ran. The mist was very confusing and I lost my way. I must have wandered a long time and then I fell over someone who jumped up, and I think I must have fainted. . . . That is all I know."

"The someone was a sheep!" he said with a reassuring laugh. "I fell among them myself."

"How stupid of me not to know. . . . But what happened to you? I thought I heard shouting. . . . I was terribly afraid for you."

"You were?"

He was absurdly glad to hear it, and then reflected swiftly that there was no useful purpose to be served by telling her of the perilous adventure into which he had fallen, so made no attempt to answer her question until it was repeated, when he replied sketchily.

"Oh, I led those fellows a dance across the field, and left my lantern in a bush to mislead them. They——"

He broke off willingly enough as out of the darkness in front came the frantic barking of a dog.

"That is Terry! . . ." she said quickly.

"Sybil! . . . Sybil! . . . Co—oo—ee—ee!"

She stirred in his arms, making a move to release herself, and whispered: "They must have missed me! They are searching for me. . . . I must go at once."

"Co—oo—ee—ee!"

"Who is that?" he asked jealously, recognising the bushman's cry.

"Arthur Stoodley! Let me down. If he finds us——" He set her on her feet, but still held her in his arms.

"My dear," he whispered. "You must do nothing in that business about which you came to see me——"

"Co—oo—ee—ee!"

"There is no time to explain now. But Stoodley

is a bigger scoundrel than you can imagine, and I think your father has little to fear from him."

A dog's yelp close at hand proclaimed imminent discovery, and Stoodley's voice calling the dog by name revealed that he was no great distance away.

"Oh, I must go."

"Yes! But first you will promise not to agree—"

"Yes! Yes!" she interrupted almost panically.

The dog barked joyously, and a little distance away a faint yellow blur appeared in the mist. Someone carrying a lantern was approaching guided by the terrier's barking. There was no time for further words. Shortland kissed her swiftly as the dog bounded up to her now frantic with delight; and as he released her, he drew back into the trees. He heard her cry to the dog; and through its frantic welcome caught Stoodley's voice, jealous and suspicious.

"Is that you, Sybil? Where in heaven's name have you been? Mr. Bayhurst and I have been worried to death about you."

The girl's reply was drowned by the dog's barking, but a moment later, the man's voice protesting and incredulous, reached him.

"A little stroll! In this beastly fog. You expect me to believe that!"

The tone stirred Shortland to anger. He was tempted to leave his concealment and teach the fellow manners; but the folly of such a course was too patent to follow. He stood there, wrathful, until the pair passed out of earshot; and then,

remembering that Lyncourt might be in the neighbourhood, he began to search for him, a sufficiently difficult task when one had to do it in silence. The fog blanketed everything. He could not see a tree until he was close upon it ; and to find anyone in that wet gloom seemed impossible. Yet it was borne upon him that he must do so, for as he moved cautiously forward he was remembering the man's wild words, spoken just as the three desperadoes had surprised him.

" But who's going to arrest me ? Dave Harlowe ? My God ! Before that I'd kill— ”

It was he felt supremely essential that he should remove any misapprehension of Lyncourt's on that point. He did not believe that the retired inspector, owing his life to the other, would even contemplate such a course. But, if Lyncourt believed he would, anything might happen. The man who for his daughter's sake had effaced himself for years apparently, and had concealed his relationship to her to save her from possible shame, might be tempted to some desperate thing under the pressure of that belief. At all costs he must find him and explain the real situation, before the two men should encounter each other. He must show him that there was more to fear from Arthur Stoodley and Bayhurst than from the inspector, since possibly the latter might be able to scotch the activities of the renegade son of his old sergeant ; for Sybil had a sufficient burden of bitter knowledge to carry without any worse thing being added to it.

He reached the edge of the trees, and felt a gravel path under his feet. Beyond that, as he guessed, was the lawn ; and stepping across the gravel he found his anticipation was the right one ; for he found smooth turf. He stood for a little while staring into the mist, seeing nothing, ears alert, but hearing no sound. Then it occurred to him that Lyncourt, desiring to be assured of the safety of his daughter, might find it expedient to approach the house ; or, since the fact of his being alive was known to its inmates, he might even enter the Lodge. At any rate there was nothing to be lost by reconnoitring. Cautiously he began to move across the lawn, quite uncertain of his direction but hoping for the best.

A few minutes passed. The deadly silence of the place unbroken save for the hooting of owls, and still seeing nothing, he was thinking that he must have gone wide of the house, when there was a faint lightening in the fog in front of him. He had, it seemed, struck the right direction after all. A nebulous blur, as he crept forward, proclaimed lighted windows ahead ; and he grew more cautious, stopping after a few steps to listen.

There was still no sound, and whilst the faint radiance was more pronounced, he still could not see the window. Then on the stillness broke the faintest scrape of a foot on gravel. The sound came from his immediate front, and crouching low, he waited, listening tensely. Again ! . . . There was someone a little distance away, moving with a caution that equalled his own, probably across a path or

gravel terrace in front of the house. A moment after there followed a burst of music, from a loud-speaker wireless or gramophone, which he could not tell; but he welcomed the music, since it would cover any slight noise which he might make in his approach.

He crept forward again, stooping low, and feeling his way with his hand lest inadvertently he should set foot upon the gravel and betray his presence. It was further than he expected to the terrace, and it appeared to be quite a long time before his fingers touched the granite chippings. Once more, as the music ceased for a moment, he halted, straining his ears for any sound that would indicate the whereabouts of the man of whose presence he was assured. He heard none, and though dimly he could discern the outline of the window from which the light came, he could see nothing else. The music was resumed, and under cover of a clashing crescendo of sound he moved forward once more. He had crossed as he guessed perhaps half the terrace, when on his right he caught the sound of a faint movement. Crouching low he waited, alert, his eyes straining to pierce the mist in the direction whence the sound had come. Again he heard it, a little nearer the house it seemed; and divining that whoever had made it was creeping towards that lighted window, he watched that, certain that the man, if he crossed the zone of light, must be silhouetted against it.

He waited breathlessly. The sound reached him again; then came something quite unexpected—the

rasping and clashing of the granite chippings as a man's foot slipped among them. What followed was sufficiently startling. The figure of a man, who must have been huddled close by the window, was lifted suddenly to view, a tall thin man whose shoulders and head with pointed beard were outlined like a shadow picture on a screen. The man turned swiftly and began to run, as Shortland was quick to note, with uneven steps. Before he himself could move, a second figure appeared which he recognised instantly as that of Lyncourt. It was but for the fraction of a second he saw the man, for in the same instant he began to run as it appeared in pursuit of the man who had been crouched by the window.

Astonished out of measure, Shortland, for a brief time, remained where he was ; then, as the music ceased, there reached him the sound of hurrying feet. A dog barked somewhere in the rear of the house ; and aware of the invidiousness of his position should he be discovered, he slipped back to the lawn ; and as fast as he dared in the fog he ran back on the way that he had come. He reached the bordering trees without mishap, and there halted to listen. The dog had ceased to bark, faintly through the silence beat the music of a fox-trot, but there was no other sound. The pursuit he had feared had not materialised, and he resumed his way unhurriedly. But as he went one question was in his mind. Who was that first man who had revealed himself by the window—the man with the pointed beard, whose steps were unequal, and whom Dan Lyncourt had

pursued? The answer was not in doubt. It was his host—whom he had left at the Church House Inn—Inspector Harlowe! He was as sure of that as he was that the second man was Lyncourt. But what was he doing there, peeping, under cover of fog and darkness, into that lighted room? The answer to that question was not immediately forthcoming. But as he thought of the two men running through the fog, and recalled the fears of the one who pursued, and the wild words to which he had given utterance, he was filled with apprehension, which drove him recklessly forward in an earnest desire to reach the Church House Inn at the earliest possible moment.

CHAPTER XII

A SHOT ON THE MOOR

IT was three quarters of an hour later when Shortland found himself outside the door of the Church House Inn, and at least an hour after closing time. There were lights within, however, and he rapped loudly on the door, anxious to assure himself that no untoward thing had overtaken the inspector. His summons was answered by the landlord in person, who looked frowningly at his late caller until he asked for Mr. Harlowe. Before the landlord could answer, Harlowe's own voice sounded.

"All right, landlord. . . . Come right in, Mr. Shortland."

Shortland drew a breath of relief and, without delay, availed himself of the invitation. He found the man he sought sitting in front of the fire, toasting his slippered feet, with whisky and a syphon on the table, where also stood a spare glass.

"Help yourself, my young friend. I had the glass put there for you."

"You were expecting me?" asked Shortland quickly.

"Well, I thought it likely that you might come."

Shortland helped himself to whisky and soda, and as he took a chair, asked abruptly:

"How long have you been in?"

A smile of amusement lit the other's eyes ; then he laughed outright.

" If I said thy servant went no whither——"

" I should not believe you. I saw you almost an hour back peeping in at the window at Harford Lodge."

" You saw me ! " Harlowe laughed again, with a little note of relief. " Then it was you I ran from ? "

" No ! "

" It wasn't ? Then who——"

" Lyncourt ! "

" Lyncourt ! " The man's tone expressed amazement. " Are you sure ? "

" I am quite sure. I saw him against the light from the window. It is a fortunate thing that you managed to evade him as I suppose you did."

" Easiest thing in the world. I never passed the gate till he'd shot by in a tearing hurry. If I'd only known that it was he——"

" Yes ? " prompted Shortland as the man paused.

" I should have had something to say to him."

That might mean anything, thought Shortland, and sought elucidation.

" You mean you would have arrested him ? "

Harlowe laughed. " No ! I haven't a warrant, and I'm only a policeman—retired. . . . Besides there would have been no need to hurry over the business ; for I can guess where Dan is to be found."

" You can ? "

"Yes! And the name he passes under."

Shortland was not surprised. To a man accustomed to unravelling mysteries and piecing evidence together, the deduction to be made from the facts that had been thrust under his notice must have been child's play. All the same he was conscious of a little pang of dismay; and his feeling revealed itself in his face. Harlowe noticed his expression and laughed.

"Gets you, I see. But the truth just hit me square as I thought things over after you'd gone with that girl. To begin with there was the name of the owner of that burned-out bungalow—David Harlowe, my own name. That in itself was nothing, an odd coincidence if you like, but no more. Then there was that man at the Tavistock Inn. That was a startler——"

"You didn't believe he was an Italian labourer then?"

"No! . . . I'll own to deceiving you there. I was dead sure that the voice I heard was Victor André's. I had his description from the landlord who had seen him two or three times—the first time with two other men, one of whom was called Soulsby. The landlord remembered the name, because it was strange to him and he thought it odd. . . . I knew then that those three scoundrels were in the neighbourhood, and I asked myself why? They weren't seeking me, for I'd shown up a day after their first call at the Tavistock Inn; but they might be seeking another man, as you suggested yourself—

to wit Dan Lyncourt ; or they might be following game in these parts where they were not known. But what game was there on Dartmoor for the hunting of such wolves ? That wasn't an easy question to answer, I'll own. But my mind harked back to that David Harlowe who was supposed to have been cremated in his house, and I found something curious in that business. . . . Once a policeman always a policeman ; and it struck me that the native sleuths were taking that affair very calmly—too calmly I thought. So when I got back and chanced to run against the local bobby—fellow of the name of Udy—just outside the inn here, I inveigled him in conversation about that ruined bungalow, and soon guessed the fellow was concealing something.

“ Poor old Udy ! ” laughed Shortland.

“ I didn't press him, but I made a shot at what he was concealing, and I got a description of the other Harlowe, which tallied with yours, and was only like Dan Lyncourt in the height of the man. But I couldn't get away from the thought that had come to me. Those three scoundrels were here—and they hadn't a line on me. But a man with my name had disappeared after his house had been gutted by fire. Assume the name was an alias, who did it hide ? . . . It isn't an uncommon name, and I'll wager an advertisement in the penny dailies would bring a dozen men of that name to light, off hand ; but it was odd to find it here in conjunction with that blackguardly trio ; and I made a shot at the man

who'd rechristened himself with a name he'd lifted from a man he'd known.

"A guess—and no more! But when that girl came, and the maid named her, I saw your face and the light came to me, I connected things up—"

"Yes! I thought you would."

"That girl— She is Dan's daughter?"

"Yes! But she didn't know it before to-day."

"Who told her?"

"Arthur Stoodley."

"The devil!"

"He is trying to blackmail her into marriage."

"Phew! Then he knows that Dan has money somewhere. Arthur Stoodley is not the man to die for love—or live for it." Harlowe was absorbed in his own thoughts for a full minute, and it was Shortland who broke the silence by a question.

"Why did you go to Harford Lodge?"

"To get a look at the owner—on the quiet," laughed the other. "When you'd gone with the girl, I had a little gossip with the landlord; and heard that Miss Lyncourt was the ward of Mr. Henry Bayhurst of Harford Lodge." He broke off and laughed again. "I'd known a Henry Bayhurst once—a pious, hypocritical, bush parson, and to find one here was the last straw. It seemed that all the folk I'd ever known had been swept into this corner of England—first André and his chums, then Lyncourt and Arthur Stoodley and lastly Bayhurst—it was like pulling rabbits out of a hat.

But I wanted to be sure, so I took a little stroll——”

“ You saw Henry Hippolyte Bayhurst ? ”

“ No ! He wasn’t in that room into which I looked through the window—only the girl and a young fellow that I guess was Stoodley.”

“ Yes. It would be he.”

The older man smoked thoughtfully for a minute or two, then he said, “ I can’t quite get the situation. Bayhurst is Miss Lyncourt’s guardian, and her father lives some miles away, and keeps his identity dark. If Bayhurst is the one I knew——”

“ Not much doubt of that I should say.”

“ No. Stoodley being there is a pointer that way. But as I was about to say, I can’t understand Dan making the fellow his daughter’s guardian.”

“ He mayn’t have known what you know about Parson Harry and——”

Harlowe gave a start of surprise. “ Where did you get that name ? ”

“ I overheard one of those ruffians use it.”

The inspector whistled. “ Then that settles it. Bayhurst is the man I suspected he was, and the fact explains young Stoodley’s presence here. No doubt he found something in his father’s note books, got a line on Bayhurst and came here to squeeze him as he has squeezed others in Australia.”

He broke off, considered a little while, then said quickly : “ Look here, Mr. Shortland, hadn’t you better come across with all you know ? I mean no harm to Dan. I am through with that old affair so far as he is concerned. Duty may be duty when

one's a sworn officer, but I'm outside that now ; and, if I weren't, common gratitude would send me packing out of this parish just as fast as I could go. . . . It seems to me that Dan is up against it pretty badly and that somebody is playing crooked with him or how did Soulsby and the others know where to look for him ? I'm willing to help him and that girl of his. I liked the look of her ; and you—well I've got eyes ! Suppose you put me wise as far as you can, and I'll give you my word to help Dan all I can ; for if there's one thing certain, I think it is that he's run straight since that old business at Wallaby Hill—and well, you know what I think about that ; for I told you before I had any notion that you'd any interest in Lyncourt and his daughter. Will you take me into your confidence —for that girl's sake."

" I'll tell you all I know and guess," answered Shortland quickly, and forthwith launched into the story.

Harlowe listened without interruption until the younger man had finished, then he whistled softly, and offered comment.

" You've had your share of luck, my friend. Those three are the biggest scoundrels unhung ; and you owe Dan as much as I do. But between us I think we can scotch whatever is in the wind. I must have a talk with Dan. I can't have him hunting me under a misapprehension as it seems he must have done to-night up at the Lodge. . . . And I can help him a whole lot. . . . I've but

got to see young Stoodley to make him quit whatever game he's on, and leave this neighbourhood just as fast as petrol will take him. And I'll make him own up what the game is——” He broke off and shot a question: “Dan's up at that place of his still, isn't he?”

“Yes.”

“Then to-morrow I've got to see him; but if you see him first tell him he can count on me, will you?”

“With all the pleasure in the world.”

“And don't worry about Stoodley and that girl. . . . It doesn't choke you off from her knowing what you know about her father?”

“No! . . . Besides, I like Lyncourt.”

The inspector laughed. “Yes, Dan does impose himself on one. I like him myself, and as we both have been hauled out of hot soup by him, we've got to help him through.”

They talked for some time longer, and very late Guy Shortland took his departure, conscious of elation at the thought that now things would work out well; and that Sybil's trouble so far as Stoodley was concerned was practically over—since after Harlowe's interview with him the blackmailer would have his hands full no doubt; and would know that his project was at an end. That elated feeling did not make for slumber, and he sat far into the night, absorbed in thought, and in pleasant anticipation. His last thought before retiring was that he must get in touch with Dan Lyncourt as early as possible, to remove from his mind any

apprehension occasioned by the knowledge of the Inspector's presence in the neighbourhood. Harlowe would do that himself of course ; but it was advisable that Lyncourt should know of the intended visit since otherwise he might be liable to misapprehend its purpose.

Exhausted by the strenuous and trying hours through which he had passed, he slept profoundly and late, and the morning was well advanced before he started on his journey to the bungalow. The fog was gone, there was bright sunlight, and the great moor in the monochrome which late autumn set upon it, had a sombre and melancholy beauty that is all its own. As he drove, he kept a bright look-out for the men who had attacked him on the previous night, but saw nothing of them. The road it seemed was completely deserted, and on the moor there was no moving thing beyond the ponies and the sheep.

But when within a mile of his destination, he was surprised to see a saddled but riderless horse galloping across the moor. It passed him at a distance of less than two hundred yards, making for the road. Stopping the car he watched it until it left the heather, then turned a little anxiously to look for the dismounted rider. He saw nothing of him. Either the horse had come a long way, or its rider had suffered some injury in his fall.

Anxious as he was to prepare Lyncourt for the inspector's coming, Guy Shortland felt that his more immediate duty was to find that fallen man. In

that solitude, away from the road, an injured man might easily perish, crying for help with none to hear ; and humanity dictated that having evidence of the accident a search should be made. Leaving his car, he began to walk across the moor in the direction from which the horse had come. He kept a bright look-out, and called out from time to time without receiving any answer.

Arriving at the crest of a piece of rising ground, over which the riderless horse must have come, he searched the slope below very carefully, without seeing any indication of the owner of the horse. The slope was strewn with gorse bushes, and thinking that the man whom he sought might be lying among them, he began to walk in that direction. At the first and second clumps he drew blanks ; but as he approached the third a voice hailed him, startling him utterly—the voice of Harlowe.

“ Looking for me, Mr. Shortland, I guess. Well walk right round this bush, and don’t see me. I’m supposed to be a dead man.”

“ Supposed to be——”

“ Shot ! Ten minutes or so ago—with a rifle. The man who did it may still be about, and I want to make sure who he is.”

“ But you’re not seriously hurt ? ”

“ No. . . . walk ! Walk all round, but don’t find me, and then go on to the next lot of bushes. . . . Then you can chuck the search, but tell me if you saw my horse——”

“ I saw a horse. It was going down the road.”

"Mine or rather mine host's. It'll give him a scare when it gets to Holne I guess. But that can't be helped. A shot man can't chase a horse; not and keep up appearances. I'm taking a leaf out of Dan's book—and playing possum a little while."

Realising that someone might be watching, Shortland skirted the bushes artistically and asked a question, being near enough to whisper.

"Were you hit?"

"No!" was the answer given with a chuckle. "I felt the wind of the bullet and heard the whine, and dropped out of the saddle like a stone. The gorse spines are sharp, but they represent the worst—so far."

Shortland moved a little further away, and with a hand lifted to shade his eyes, appeared to search the slope below.

"But who—"

"Can't say!" replied the unseen man curtly. But I can reckon the possibles. I've been over to Lyncourt's house, without seeing him."

"You think that he—"

"One of the possibles. He might think he had good reason! But it may have been someone else. . . . You didn't see anyone on the moor as you came along?"

"Not a soul!"

"Naturally the fellow wouldn't show himself. But if you are on the way to Lyncourt you'd better go and abandon me to my fate, having failed to find

me." The inspector chuckled at his jest. Then he gave directions.

"Wait at Dan's till I come. I may be half an hour, an hour perhaps—but wait. Don't worry about me. I don't suppose the fellow who killed me will return to inspect his handiwork. If he does——" The words ended in a dry laugh, and then came the order: "Off you go, my friend. No good prolonging your search. If the beggar is watching, it is as well to assure him that my dead body has escaped notice."

Guy Shortland turned up the slope and walked slowly back to his car. Not for a moment did he doubt that the inspector's life had been attempted, and one word was beating in his brain.

"Who? . . . Who? . . . Who?"

At first he found it significant that Harlowe had been to the bungalow without finding its owner at home. Recalling Lyncourt's outburst on the previous night, and his pursuit of the other down at Harford Lodge, it was very possible that the ex-bushranger, observing the inspector's approach, had misunderstood his purpose; and, rendered desperate, had hidden himself and fired the murderous shot. Possible—but the next moment he was assuring himself that it could not be. In spite of that half-spoken threat, such an action was foreign to Lyncourt's character and disposition. He was not the man to crouch in a gorse bush and with stealth attempt the life of a man whom he had once saved from death. If such a thing were in his

mind he would meet his enemy in the gate, openly, man to man.

Assuring himself of that, he reached his car, and before starting it stood up and once more surveyed the moor. It seemed empty of life, but as he stared across the brown desolation, two miles or more away, he saw something moving. He watched carefully. It might be nothing but a browsing pony or a sheep—no! It was not that, for whilst he watched, the brown hillside seemed to start into life, half a score of moving things running in a huddle across it—as if startled by the thing he had first observed. The smallness of them told him they were sheep, and sheep he argued would not have been so startled by one of the moorland ponies. He watched the cause of their disturbance closely, his eyes following it with some difficulty across the brown hillside. He lost it behind an outcrop of gaunt rock, but three minutes later glimpsed it again at the top of the slope, limned against the skyline—a man on horseback.

There, he told himself, rode the man who had fired at David Harlowe, whoever he was. It might be Lyncourt; it was much more likely to be Victor André or one of his confrères who had become aware of his presence in the neighbourhood, but in a few minutes he would know—if Lyncourt were at home. He drove quickly to the ruined house, drew up at the gate, and leaving the car walked straight to the rear of the place. He found the garage door closed and locked, and there was no response

to his knocking. Lyncourt, then, was away, and—

The thought was disproved before it was finished.

There was a sound of movement away to the right, and in the same second Lyncourt appeared, having it seemed been concealed somewhere in the shrubbery. His face, as Shortland noticed, had a harried, careworn look, and as he came forward he looked back over his shoulder towards the road. Guy Shortland suddenly divined what was in his mind, and laughed cheerfully.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Lyncourt, Harlowe will be back presently.”

“The deuce he will!”

Lyncourt, it seemed, found no consolation in the assurance; but it was equally clear that he knew of no reason why the inspector should not return.

“Yes,” replied Shortland, “and he comes as a friend. You can accept my word on that. He was here a little while ago—”

“I saw him, and quit. I’ve been lying in the heather ever since till I saw you drive up. But is it true what you say? He isn’t coming with a warrant—”

“If he had one I believe he would burn it. . . . He wants to help you and Sybil—”

“Thank God!” broke in the other fervently, then asked: “Where is the old boy?”

“I left him lying in a gorse clump on the lookout for a man who had fired at him with a rifle apparently.”

"Phew! You don't mean it? Who——"

"Don't know, and he doesn't. At first I was afraid it might be you. I saw you running after him at the Lodge last night——"

"After him! It was he? I thought it was one of those three. . . . I never saw his face. . . . But if they know he is here. . . . That rifle you spoke of. It may be André's patent mahl-stick!"

"Possibly! . . . But does André ride?"

"Like a steeple-chaser, as do the other two. They've all been boundary riders in their time—as I have. But what makes you ask?"

"After I left Harlowe in the gorse, away on the moor a good two miles away I saw a horseman. He may have been the man who fired on the inspector."

"Yes, that sounds likely. . . . But come indoors. We shall be able to see Dave Harlowe from the window when he arrives."

Shortland followed the other into the garage, and climbed the steps to the room above. There was now a hammock there in addition to a bedstead, and as the visitor saw it the other noticed his attention and explained.

"Adam—my man—is here with me. . . . Just now he is down at Harford playing guardian angel—looking after Sybil on the quiet."

"As he was yesterday."

"Yes. . . . You know about that! . . . I was going to have Sybil sent away for a little time. André and the others may try to get me through

her, and I can't go to the police. I can deal with them if I know she is beyond their reach. Two of them can be bought off, but I'm not sure of André, and if we were in the back blocks I should know what to do." He stood for a little time staring out of the window, then he made a little gesture of pain. "There's a saying I heard long ago, Shortland, about old sins having long shadows, and it's true. Twenty years I've been trying to wipe out that old business. I've lived straight. I've more than paid that gold back we lifted——"

"I know," intervened Shortland, moved by the trouble in the man's voice. "Harlowe told me. He'd found that out somehow."

"But it is all no use. Here's the shadow covering me again. And . . . Sybil." His voice shook and took a hoarse note. "I've tried to keep her out of it—Lord knows how I've tried. And now——"

"Sybil's going to marry me, I hope," blurted Shortland. "Last night she promised——"

Lyncourt's face was transfigured by the news.

"You mean it?" he cried. "Knowing what you do?"

"Yes. I knew—er—about you when I asked her. It makes no difference. Sybil wasn't in that business——"

"No! She wasn't born! . . . But you've taken a load off my mind. . . . I know about you from the papers. And I'll tell you something. Sybil will be rich, with money honestly earned. That house of Bayhurst's is mine. He's no more than a bailiff,

with a sort of power of attorney in case of certain eventualities."

"Ah! That is it!"

"What d'you mean?" There was a harsh note of demand in the question. "Something about Harry Bayhurst, I guess. Tell me. I've a right to know!"

"Well, Bayhurst mayn't be all you think him?"

"Crooked? . . . But he's a parson! And his sister, who keeps house, was head of a fine girl's school—as straight as a yard stick."

"Maybe! . . . But there is something in Bayhurst's past. I don't know what it is, but André and the others know, and I fancy Stoodley knows, and either he or Bayhurst brought these three ruffians here——"

"Oh, I've guessed that. . . . I've thought of Bayhurst. I'll have it out with him to-night. And that young fellow . . . what have you got to say about him?"

Guy Shortland hesitated. Lyncourt might suffer treachery against himself, but it was clear that Sybil was as the apple of his eye, and that anyone who threatened her welfare would provoke him to terrific wrath. To tell him what he knew might have catastrophic consequences, and it seemed better to suppress the knowledge for the moment. He forced a laugh and replied lightly enough.

"Nothing much. He had pretensions . . . but he is out of it now."

As he spoke he moved to the window and looked

out, and with a feeling of infinite relief saw the inspector coming up the road that led to the bungalow.

“Here’s Harlowe coming. I’ll go to meet him.”

He did not wait for permission, but descending the stairs, hurried forth and down the road. As he met the older man he asked: “You saw that horseman go over the hill?

“Yes.”

“And Dan is here. He has been here all the time. He saw you arrive and hid himself. He can’t have been the man who tried to shoot you.”

Harlowe laughed.

“I never thought he was. He was among the possibles, but no more. And if he’d wanted to do a trick like that this valley would have served better for the job. . . . He’s going to see me?”

“Yes. I’ve told him how you stand. . . . I think you had better see him alone. But there is one thing—don’t tell too much about Stoodley. It—well—it might be dangerous. Bayhurst is another horse. Already he suspects him—but Bayhurst isn’t blackmailing Sybil, you understand?”

“Yes. We’ve got to save Dan from being swept out of himself by passion. Don’t worry. I’ll manage him. . . . And I’ll manage Stoodley. . . . That horseman now, would you think it was Henry Bayhurst?”

“Great Scott!”

“Or Arthur Stoodley?”

"But—oh! confound it, how can either of them know you are here?"

"They've got eyes—and ears."

"But if they haven't seen—"

"One of them has. Early this morning I took a stroll past the Lodge Gates. Parson Harry was there talking to the postman. I was on them before I saw them, and I had to keep going or call undesired attention to myself. I walked past, and Bayhurst looked at me once—as anyone on the countryside might look at a stranger—a little curiously. His face never changed, but there was doubt in his eyes, then a flicker—no more; but he recognised me, I'll swear, as he had reason to. I never looked round, but I guess he asked the postman a thing or two, and as the man had seen me at the Church House, why, there you are, I reckon."

"Then—"

"Yes. Either he or Stoodley, or André and Co. But which is beyond me. . . . But here we are at the gate. Now for Dan and old acquaintance. If you're waiting—"

"Oh, I'll wait, of course."

Harlowe passed through the gate, and Shortland, after watching him limp up the drive and past the gutted house, turned and began to pace up and down the road, absorbed in thought. To and fro he moved like a man doing sentry-go, but with never an eye for things about him, until the sound of a car somewhere on the high road forced itself upon his attention. Even then he looked round but once,

with the merest, cursory glance, and went on with his pacing and absorbed meditation, until the noise of the engine pulling on the hill ceased suddenly ; and he realised that the car had stopped—almost exactly opposite the bungalow but hidden by the crest of the slope across the valley. With that he halted, and stared in the direction of the unseen highway. A minute passed—two minutes—and the car did not resume its way, but at the end of that time a girl appeared at the top of the slope looking towards the bungalow. He recognised her instantly, and waving his hand, cried her name joyfully.

“ Sybil ! Sybil ! ”

The result of his action astonished him, for instantly the girl turned and fled. In three seconds she was out of sight. Before he could think or act the gu-r-r-r of the car in low gear reached his ears. The gu-r-r-r became a soft steady purr, and as it receded and grew fainter it was borne on him that the girl whom he had been overjoyed to see was fleeing from him as if spurred by some great fear.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE RAIN

UTTERLY amazed, Shortland stared across the valley, asking himself what was the meaning of Sybil's flight—for flight it had been, though he could think of no reason for it. In vain he questioned himself. That Sybil, knowing now that her father was alive, had come secretly to visit him seemed probable; that she had been surprised at his own presence outside the gate was likely; but why she should turn and hurry away without word or sign was a mystery beyond solution. It disturbed him profoundly, since, think as he would, he could find nothing to account for it.

That something had occurred to disturb the relation established between them was only too abundantly clear. Nothing less, he was assured, could have made her so eager to avoid him as to move her to run from him without a word. That he was waiting outside her father's house when she was proposing to visit it—perhaps secretly—was not a sufficient reason. That he was aware of her father's old crime was within her knowledge, and that Lyncourt still lingered in the neighbourhood, as she knew, was no secret where he was concerned; what then had so disturbed her, and why at the sight of him should she have abandoned her intention and fled in utter panic?

He worried himself for quite a long time, and at last reached a decision to seek out Sybil at the earliest possible moment. He must, he told himself, learn the cause of her fear, that he might remove it at once, and at the same time he would tell her how Lyncourt approved his suit. It would be quite simple to walk up to Harford Lodge and ask to see her—far better than waiting for any chance meeting ; and once he had seen her the difficulty, whatever it was, would vanish.

Steps sounded behind him, and he turned to find Inspector Harlowe approaching the gate, plainly well-pleased with the interview that had just ended. He gave the result to Shortland in a cheerful way.

“ Dan and I have swapped news, pooled information, and are going into temporary partnership. He didn’t know Bayhurst’s record, and what I told him was an eye-opener. To-night he’s going down to Harford to read the riot act, and to remove his daughter out of Bayhurst’s jurisdiction. He is cancelling the contingent power of attorney he has given the parson, and to-morrow Bayhurst and his sister, who—poor woman—is quite blameless, will be looking for a new job, and in a week Harford will be for sale.”

“ But is it safe to let him go alone ? ” asked Shortland thoughtfully. “ Lyncourt is a tempestuous man.”

“ He isn’t going alone. I’m going with him, and I am going to take your girl out of this business—to

my wife in Rutlandshire, whilst Dan makes new arrangements."

"If you're going, can't I go with you, inspector? There may be trouble—with Stoodley, for instance; and it's worth while remembering that someone tried to kill you this morning."

"Oh, I'm not forgetting that," laughed Harlowe. "I'll ask you to put up that patent hood of yours, as I'm going to squat in the bottom of the car in case we should run against that marksman—whose identity we don't know. And by-the-by, the sooner the hood is in place, and we are moving away from here, the better. Someone might happen along, you know."

"But—my question? Mayn't I go with you?"

Harlowe laughed. "Yes. That's settled. Dan and I fixed it. In case there is trouble you are to look after his daughter. . . . But I don't think there will be. Bayhurst is a downy one; but he won't know whether I'm official or unofficial, and there are things in his past that he won't want reviving. He'll double up—at the word."

"And Stoodley?"

"He'll run as like as not when he finds that his game is checkmated. And besides, there is that bit of fancy shooting out on the moor there. If he were the man behind the gun—which, of course, we don't know—he'll be in a dead funk, and that will be a spur to speed his going."

Five minutes later, with the hood up, and David Harlowe seated on the floor of the car behind, they

began the return journey. On the way they met no one save a man driving a brewer's dray, and as they reached the neighbourhood of Newbridge the inspector spoke.

"Mind putting me up for a few hours, Mr. Shortland?"

"Not in the least."

"Then drive straight to your place, and then if you don't mind slip down to the Church House and tell 'em that I've had a fall an' won't be back for a day or two. No need to particularise too closely. . . . But as the horse will have made its stable I don't want a search party out looking for a man who isn't there."

"No."

"And you might keep your eyes skinned for any sight of that pair up at the Lodge. If either of them fired that shot he will maybe want to know whether I've shown up or not, though that cropper of mine was quite artistic."

Shortland obeyed instructions to the letter, fenced a little with the landlord's natural curiosity, and seeing nothing of either Stoodley or his host, drove straight up to Harford. As he passed up the approach he watched the house closely, and at an upstairs window had a slimpse of Sybil. His heart leaped at the sight. Luck was with him, she was at home, and now he would learn the cause of her disturbing flight. Swinging round to the terrace, he saw a groom rubbing down a horse that had most evidently been ridden hard, with Arthur Stoodley

standing by watching the operation. Was he the man whom he had seen ride over the crest of the hill, the man who had fired at Harlowe? It seemed more than likely, though there could be no certainty.

As he went by the man looked at him sharply, started, and fairly ran towards the rear of the house. Shortland, divining that the man guessed he had come to see Sybil, and meant to prevent any interview, spurred and, stopping the car opposite the door, leaped out and was ringing the bell in no time at all. He rang with such energy that a maid came at the run, then frowned at him as he asked curtly :

“ Miss Lyncourt at home ? ”

“ She is in the house,” answered the maid on her dignity. “ Whether she is at home or not I do not know.”

Shortland produced a card and scribbled four words upon it: “ To see you urgently.” He handed the maid the card with a treasury note under it as a salve for her outraged dignity :

“ Please take this card to Miss Lyncourt as quickly as you can.”

The note had its effect ; the frown vanished, and it was an entirely affable maid who replied :

“ Yes, sir.”

She moved from the door, and Shortland saw her cross the hall and begin to ascend the wide staircase. He saw something else also. A door opened, and flushed and scowling Arthur Stoodley appeared. He glared at Shortland still standing on the steps,

marked the girl with a salver in her hand mounting the stairs, and no doubt realised that he was too late to check any message Shortland might have sent. But for all that he acted promptly. Turning sharply away he entered a room on his right, and a moment later the visitor caught a sound of voices. He waited with interest what was to follow, and found it sufficiently surprising. For a minute and a half later, from the room that Stoodley had entered, emerged Mr. Henry Bayhurst, a questioning look on his pink, smooth-shaven face, which to Shortland's eyes had the sleek look of the hypocrite. Shortland, who had met him once, gave the man a conventional greeting.

"Good morning, Mr. Bayhurst."

The other looked at him with no sign of recognition in eyes or face, and in a voice that was as flat and wooden as his face, returned the greeting.

"Ah—er—good morning, Mr.—Mr.—er—"

"Shortland," the owner of the name prompted.

"Ah—er—Mr. Shortman. You wished to see me?"

"No. It is Miss Lyncourt I wish to see."

"A pity!" said Mr. Bayhurst blandly. "She will no doubt be desolated at having missed you, but she is out."

Guy Shortland could have laughed in the man's face, instead he smiled cheerfully.

"You are under a misapprehension, Mr. Bayhurst. I saw her at an upper window as I came up the drive, and a maid has just taken my card to her."

Mr. Bayhurst showed no discomposure. He smiled a little whimsically. "Mr.—er—Shortman, you compel me to a discourteous literalism that I would have avoided in order to spare your feelings. I said that my ward was out, but I will translate for you and say she is not at home—to you. I am sorry, but there you have it. I will wish you a good day."

"Good day, Mr. Bayhurst, but I propose to wait for Miss Lyncourt's answer to my message."

"You propose to wait?" Mr. Henry Bayhurst's face wore a shocked incredulous expression. He appeared not to be able to believe his ears. Then his blandness vanished. "My fine fellow, you can wait till hell's fires are clinkers, but you won't see my ward."

He shut the door in his visitor's face, and through the glass panels Shortland could see the man glaring at him, with Stoodley in the background grinning. Something else he saw also—the maid coming down the stairs with the salver in her hand. The two men within turned as she reached the foot of the stairs, and Mr. Bayhurst shot a question, a very brief one, from the time it took. The maid answered as briefly, and a second later the man hurried to the door, opened it, and beckoned the maid forward.

"Give the gentleman his message, Mary."

The maid stepped forward. There was a look of commiseration in her eyes, but she spoke in the formal manner of the well-trained servant.

"Miss Lyncourt is not at home, sir."

The message completely discomfited Shortland. He knew that there could have been no communication between Sybil and the two men in the hall, the message, therefore, was Sybil's very own. No one had dictated it to her; for some reason that was hidden from him she had resolved not to see him; and the refusal in conjunction with her flight on seeing him outside the bungalow seemed an ominous thing.

Conscious that the two men in the hall were regarding him with malicious amusement, he turned on his heel and returned to his car. Stoodley's laughter followed him as he went, stirring him to sudden passion, and begetting an impulse to turn and rend the man by proclaiming his baseness; but he repressed the impulse, and holding his peace, entered the car and proceeded to reverse it. The two men moved to the steps to watch him. Their presence disturbed him, so that he bungled the job and left the deep impress of two wheels on a flower bed. Mr. Bayhurst jibed in a mild voice.

"My dear fellow, why do you drive a car? A plough is your natural implement."

He ignored the innuendo, and fearing that his anger might still lead him to some retort that might sound the alarm in the minds of the pair, resolutely averted his eyes, and drove away without another word. His face was burning as he moved towards the gates. To appear as a fool in the eyes of others was not a pleasant experience, whilst his utter

discomfiture was galling. But all sense of humiliation vanished as he thought of Sybil's refusal to see him.

"In heaven's name, what is the meaning of it?" he whispered to himself, and found no consoling answer anywhere.

That the girl might have repented her hasty promise of the previous night, he recognised as a possibility, and did not find it cheering. But there were, he told himself, other possibilities. Bayhurst, or more likely Arthur Stoodley, guessing something of the situation, might have intervened and put heavy pressure on the girl, possibly indicated some new jeopardy for her father, in order to bend her to his will. He found comfort in that thought, knowing that whatever it was it could scarcely survive the visit which Dan Lyncourt and Inspector Harlowe purposed to pay to the Lodge in a few hours. Then would come his own opportunity, and with Stoodley's threats nullified and with Lyncourt to support him he had no fear of the issue.

Clouds were drifting across the moor when he made Holne, and there were signs that before the day was out the weather would have completely changed. When evening came it was already raining, a steady downpour which made the prospect of a two or three mile walk anything but alluring, but Inspector Harlowe found a grain of comfort in it.

"We shall be able to make the Lodge without being noticed. André and those other two are

likely to hug the fire on a night like this, or seek consolation at the Tavistock Arms. We shan't have them butting in on us, and after to-night we shall be able to deal with them, I fancy."

They were due to meet Lyncourt at the Lodge gates at nine o'clock, and arriving there in a considerable downpour found they were before time. Sheltering as best they could under the trees, they waited in silence for Lyncourt's coming, which seemed unconscionably delayed. Then at length came the sound of steps.

"At last!" said Harlowe, and was on the point of stepping into the open when a voice came out of the rainy darkness.

"Wait five minutes, then make for the house secretly. Keep out of sight until I give the signal, then ring the bell, you understand."

The speaker passed on through the gateway and towards the house, whilst the second person, still unseen, remained somewhere in the shadows.

David Harlowe groped for his companion's arm, and having found it whispered in his ear :

"Now, who the dickens was that?"

"Stoodley! I recognised his voice."

"Um! And who's the person who waits?"

"Don't know."

"There's some curious game on. I wish I knew what it was. That young scoundrel has a cunning mind."

The unseen person who waited moved nearer the trees, apparently seeking shelter from the pitiless

rain. Two or three minutes passed and Lyncourt's coming was still delayed, then the squelching steps sounded, and the unknown approached the gates. In the same second the inspector moved swiftly and silently forward, head bent as if to avoid the rain, and an instant later cannoned against the individual just as the gate was reached. Shortland jumped as out of the darkness came a startled feminine cry, and on the heels of it caught Harlowe's voice anxiously apologetic.

"A thousand pardons, madame, I did not see you because of the rain. I trust you are not hurt."

"Hurt? No." The answer was accompanied by a giggle. "But you gave me a real bad scare bumping into me like that. . . . My heart ain't what it was, an' you've sort of shook it up. It's beating like a drum."

"I'm very sorry. If I can do anything——"

"You can't, not unless you've a nip of brandy on you."

"And that, alas, I haven't."

"No! I didn't expect you would have. 'Tis few gentlemen who carry a flask nowadays. But there—there ain't no harm done. . . . Good night!"

"Good night!" answered the inspector, and limped forward into the rainy darkness, whilst the woman turned in at the gates and moved slowly up the drive. Within two minutes Harlowe was back under the tree where Shortland awaited him.

" You heard ? " he asked.

" Yes ! A woman wasn't it ? "

" A woman—no class ! Reeked of whisky worse than a second-rate bar. But who is she, and what the dickens is she doing here ? There's some odd move on. You heard Stoodley tell her to wait till he gave the signal ? . . . I'd give a fiver to know what it means."

" Well, we may learn in the next half hour. . . . Ah ! Here's Lyncourt at last."

The man for whom they waited came hurriedly out of the gloom, and was told of the inspector's encounter with the unknown woman.

" The woman doesn't matter a button," he said with a short laugh. " That young Stoodley has some dirty game going I'll warrant, but it makes no difference to us, whatever it does to Bayhurst." Then he added sharply :

" I've been thinking over things. It will be wisest in the first case if I go in to Bayhurst alone and have it out with him. You two can wait outside."

" Just as you like. But be careful. Bayhurst is the sort of sleek rat who bites when he's put in a corner."

" Don't worry ! I'm not afraid of anything he will do."

They moved forward, and in a short time came in sight of the Lodge. Two windows in the front were lighted, and through one of them they saw Bayhurst pacing a long room in an obviously agitated way.

There was no sign of Stoodley or of Sybil. Shortland looked up at the window where he had seen the girl earlier in the day and found it was dark. Then Lyncourt spoke.

"Something is nipping Henry. That's as plain as a church, but he'll feel that he has been clawed as well within the next five minutes. . . . Wait here. I'll wave for you if I want you."

He waited for no reply, but moved straight to the house door, rang, and less than a minute later was ushered into the room where Bayhurst was. The latter, as the two watchers could see, betrayed extreme surprise at his appearance; whilst Lyncourt, stopping in the middle of the room, appeared to ask a question. Whatever the question was, it increased Mr. Bayhurst's agitation markedly. He threw up his hands like a man who is in despair, and spoke for some little time, betraying every sign of a man in panic.

What he was saying the watchers could not even guess, but to Lyncourt it must have been infinitely disturbing, for he leaped forward, caught the other by the throat and shook him with a violence that moved the inspector to whisper:

"I hope Dan won't go too far! . . . I didn't want him to go alone, really. He may be too violent. Ah! That's better!"

Lyncourt had released the other man, and the two were talking again. It was plainly a case of question and answer, for as one ceased the other began; then quite suddenly Lyncourt raised a

clenched fist threateningly, and his face had a ferocious expression. The other man backed from him and stood cowering against the carved mantelpiece, a picture of craven fear. A moment later, Lyncourt turned and left the man alone. As he appeared at the door the inspector moved forward, and Shortland followed him.

“What——” began the inspector.

“Sybil’s gone!” said the big man with something very like a groan. “Went out this afternoon and has never come back. Bayhurst is worried to death about it, and I’m sure he doesn’t know where she is. . . . But I can guess. Those three ruffians have got hold of her. They mean to get at me through her. But, my God! I’ll teach them a lesson this time.”

He began to hurry down the drive at a pace which made it difficult for the others to keep up with him. The inspector called after him.

“Wait, Dan! Let us have the details of the business.”

“Wait! . . . Man, can’t you think what may be happening to Sybil? . . . Ask Shortland. He knows what those scoundrels are capable of. Wait . . . God in heaven! if——”

Harlowe intervened. “She went out this afternoon, you say? She was alone of course.”

“Yes.”

“Walking or driving?”

“Heaven knows! I never thought to ask?”

“Was she going anywhere in particular—a call or anything of that sort?”

"How should I know. She wasn't in for dinner, and has been missing for six hours. And she isn't out for choice in this weather. . . . Bayhurst is worried half to death. . . . He thinks André and the others have gathered her, and I'm going to find them—and her."

"We'll come with you," said Shortland, with a quietness that astonished himself, for he was torn between anger and apprehension as he thought of what the girl might be enduring at the hands of the men who had proposed to deal with himself in such murderous fashion. "They'll have her at that derelict farm——"

"Yes! But she won't be there longer than it takes us to get there."

Lyncourt plunged forward again, making a pace; and the others followed him as best they could. No one spoke again for quite a long time. Shortland, as he hurried on, was consumed with apprehension, and tormenting himself with impossible things. If only they could call in the police authorities the trio would run to save themselves. But that was out of the question since it would mean almost inevitably the exposure of Lyncourt's old association with them. They had to deal with the affair outside the law, for his sake and for Sybil's, and now—— His imagination pictured what might happen when they reached that desolate house. Lyncourt was raging like a bull. If Sybil had been in any way maltreated anything might happen, and Harlowe and himself would be powerless to prevent the

violence to which almost inevitably Lyncourt would have recourse. He whispered his fears to the inspector, who, however, had a reassuring thought.

" You're forgetting Miss Lyncourt. She'll provide the brake on Dan's rage. But if she isn't there and they are——"

The unfinished sentence was expressive. Shortland knew the fear that was in his mind and shared it; and when at last they reached the derelict house, in spite of his concern for Sybil, he was beset by fear of what the next few minutes might bring forth. If anything dreadful happened it would be a permanent shadow on Sybil's life, and the result might be tragical for Lyncourt himself. They plunged through the broken gateway, splashed their way through pools of rain water at the heels of the hurrying man, who, when he reached the front of the house, halted and surveyed it for a brief time.

The boarded windows were dark, no light showing at even a single chink. The only sound was the swishing of the rain, and as Shortland peered through the gloom at the place, the last owner of which had died by his own hand, he shivered, for it seemed to him the very abomination of desolation. At the end of half a minute Lyncourt gave a grunt and stalking to the door tried it. It was fast.

" Wait here," he said with the curtness of a man under great strain. " Stop anyone who comes out."

He moved to the rear of the house; and waiting, with ears alert for any sound, Shortland thought he heard a splintering of boards, and guessed that the

man was breaking a way through one of the windows. A few minutes passed, then there was a noise of feet on the flagged passage within.

“ Someone coming,” said Harlowe, and tautened himself for a spring, whilst the younger man hastily shifted his position.

Then the door opened and showed Lyncourt with a lighted match.

“ A dead blank ! ” he said hoarsely. “ They’re not here, and there’s no sign whatever of Sybil. I don’t believe that she has ever been here.”

Inspector Harlowe whistled softly to himself, then asked quietly.

“ What’s to be done ? ”

“ We’ve got to find these three,” said Lyncourt, in a voice that shook. “ I know them, and what they’re capable of.”

Harlowe whistled again, and shot another question.

“ Suppose they’re not in it at all ? ” . . . There’s Stoodley ! I gather he has ideas of his own regarding your daughter, Dan. You didn’t see him when you——”

“ No, by thunder ! I never thought of him ! ”

“ It might be worth while to ask——”

The crash of the door interrupted the words.

“ Come on ! I’ll have the truth, if I choke it out of him.”

And as he spoke, half-distraught with apprehensions, Lyncourt once more led the way through the rain and darkness.

CHAPTER XIV

BACK AT HARFORD

IN a remarkably brief time, as it seemed to Shortland, they reached the neighbourhood of the Lodge again, and were making for the gates when out of the darkness ahead came the oath of a half-t tipsy man, then a voice raised in expostulation.

“Steady, Dandy, or you’ll have me on the pailings.”

Lyncourt stopped dead.

“Soulsby!” whispered Lyncourt, with savage exultation. “Those fellows are in front of us.”

“And going to the Lodge, as sure as a gun,” said Harlowe, in a quick whisper. “Let them go, Dan. We’ll follow, and learn more that way. . . . It seems there’s a pretty situation developing. If they have your girl they’re going to bargain with Bayhurst, and we shall learn all we want to know. . . . Wait! . . . Give them a start. We’ll follow up.”

“But if we miss them?”

“There’s no fear of that. They——”

“Here’s the gate.”

“You heard that? . . . There’s no question of their destination. We shan’t miss them! For your daughter’s sake curb yourself, Dan. If we intervene now they may disperse, and in this rain and darkness we shall never find them again to-night.”

The inspector's urgent pleading prevailed. Lyncourt halted, and though tormented by apprehensions and seven devils of impatience, waited for the other to give the word. It seemed an age before Harlowe whispered :

" Now ! But go slow. We don't want to overrun them. It will be better to let them get into action, whatever their objective may be, then we will surprise them."

They entered the gates and moved slowly and cautiously up the drive. Once or twice the voices of the men in front reached them, and it was clear that the trio were making no effort to ensure a secret approach. As they drew nearer the house it was possible to see the ex-convicts against the light from the windows as it streamed through the rain, and easy to regulate the distance David Harlowe desired. Then, just as their quarry reached the terrace, clearly visible against the lighted window, something happened. A fourth figure seemed to rise from the ground. One of the convicts gave a shout.

" Grab him ! "

There was something of a struggle. Through the swishing of the rain a scream sounded, then followed a voice speaking in a surprised tone.

" Lor', Soulsby. It's a petticoat."

A flashlight cut the darkness like a sword, and the three men gathering round their captive hid her from view, whilst from words that reached the three listeners they questioned her.

"That woman whom we saw," whispered Shortland to the inspector.

"Yes. Listen. We may get——"

"Chinkie Jane—as I'm a sinner!" The voice was Soulsby's, and his astonishment rang in the words.

"They know her," whispered Harlowe. "Whatever Arthur Stoodley's game was, this blows it sky-high."

"Yes——"

Lyncourt's voice, strained and hoarse, intervened.

"That woman there? You saw her—spoke with her? What was she like?" Then without waiting for the answer, he gave an inarticulate sound that to Shortland was very like a groan of despair. A second later he broke out.

"God . . . it never rains but——"

"You know the woman, Dan?" asked Harlowe quickly.

"Know her! . . . I'd give my right hand if I'd never seen her. She ruined my life—and comes back now to complete the job. If I had known——"

There was a sound of subdued laughter from the men in front, then followed a voice.

"So dat ees zee game. She ees a trump card dat anoder man was going to play. Now we steal hees leetle plan an' play zee game. She ees a—a what you call eet—Ah—a godsend. . . . Come along, *ma belle*. We take you to see zee man who live een dis fine house, an' your beauty shall move hees heart to be generous."

There was a hysterical protest on the part of the woman, which moved Shortland to a thought of intervention.

“ We can’t allow these brutes——”

“ Steady, my son,” said Harlowe quickly. “ There’s no harm being done yet, and if you butt in you may upset the apple cart. Better wait and see to what market it is going. What do you say, Lyncourt ? ”

“ Say ? . . . What do I say ? . . . My God ! What is there to be said ? ”

The man spoke distraughtly, as if some unexpected and devastating thing had overtaken him. Both his companions marked the change of demeanour and the blank despair of his tone, and Harlowe asked a quick question.

“ Something hit you, Dan ? ”

“ A knock-out thing,” answered the other with a groan. “ Nothing worse could have happened. That woman . . . I have thought to be dead these four and twenty years. There can’t be two women with that nickname. . . . But perhaps I didn’t hear aright. . . . What was the name, Harlowe ? Tell me ! My ears may have tricked me.”

He was a man clutching at a straw without any real hope that it would avail him, and Shortland peered at him in wonder, whilst Harlowe answered the question.

“ The name Soulsby gave her was Chinkie Jane.”

“ Then heaven help me—and my little girl. Thank God she’s not here to see that woman ! ”

"But all the same, Mr. Lyncourt," said Shortland quickly, "we've got to find Sybil soon. I don't know what's harrying you, but that woman, whoever she is, can't be allowed to turn us aside from that. And see, those scoundrels are at the door—the woman with them. Let us go forward."

"If that woman sees me——"

"She need not. We can watch them from outside, or you can watch whilst Mr. Harlowe and I go inside. I fancy Bayhurst isn't going to shut the door on me to-night. Within the next five minutes he will be glad of any sort of company, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes," said the inspector. "I guess that's true. He will be glad to see even me. . . . And Dan, there's a whole lot to be said for your remaining outside, whilst Shortland and I learn the truth about Sybil if we can. You don't want to meet that woman, and I'm not inquiring why; but if you go in you are bound to do so, whilst outside you can watch unseen, and if there's trouble the window may be a strategic point."

A shout sounded from the neighbourhood of the house, and looking towards the door they saw the three men and the woman disappearing inside.

"Jove! They've rushed the door!" cried the inspector. "Come along, Shortland. We may miss something vital."

He led the way swiftly across the wet grass with Shortland at his heels, Lyncourt further behind. As they reached the end of the terrace the inspector

slowed down, and Shortland glimpsed a car standing at the side of the house, and had a side thought that it was a queer place to leave a car on such a night, but the thought was banished utterly by the sight that met his eyes as he looked through the window of the lighted room.

By the fireplace stood Henry Bayhurst, a wild light in his eyes, his sleek face full of consternation. He was staring towards the door of the room, where in a bunch stood the three ruffians with the woman whom Stoodley had left in the garden and who, a cringing, dripping figure, was to the fore, with Soulsby's hand gripping her shoulder. That some kind of challenging confrontation was in progress was evident, and as he stared he heard Harlowe's voice behind him.

"Take the window, Dan, and watch, but keep out of things unless there is trouble. It looks as if Bayhurst had his hands full just now, and he will be glad of help. Come along, Mr. Shortland. We'll invite ourselves inside like those others. There's neither time nor need for ceremony."

He led the way towards the door. It stood open, and without troubling to ring they passed inside. As they entered the hall Shortland caught sight of two domestics on the gallery above, clutching each other and staring down with scared eyes, and at the same time thought he saw someone slip through a doorway further up the hall. Of the latter he was not sure, the light being poor and the hall full of shadows, and he had no time to make certain,

for a second later his attention was drawn to the room where Bayhurst was facing his uninvited guests. The door stood half open, and a voice that he recognised for Soulsby's was speaking.

"Better get off that horse, Parson Harry. You ain't seen us for a goodish number of years, but you know us right enough, and to make out you don't ain't what I call a right welcome to old chums."

"Chums!" Mr. Bayhurst's voice shook as he replied. "I tell you I do not know you."

"Rot!" answered Soulsby sharply. "You know us just as well as we know you an'—"

"Go away at once," interrupted Bayhurst, plainly making an attempt to assert himself. "If you don't I shall telephone for the police."

"Police!" Soulsby laughed as he echoed the word. "Fat lot of good that would do you. You'd be done for before they got here." His voice grew derisive. "We ain't afraid to call that bluff. You go to the telephone, Harry. The police, when they come, will be joyful to hear what we can tell 'em about Henry Bayhurst, Esquire."

There was a brief pause in the conversation, and Guy Shortland edged a little nearer the door that he might see in the room. The backs of the intruders blocked the whole of the open space, and he could see nothing of Bayhurst. He stood wondering if the man would dare to carry out his threat. A moment later he knew that he would not.

"What—what do you want?"

The tone of the question rather than the words

indicated more or less abject surrender; and Soulsby laughed triumphantly.

"Now you're talking sensible, Harry. . . . What do we want, asks you, an' I answer that we want a whole lot, us having come all the way from the Antipodes at your invitation."

"I never sent for you."

"Oh, bunkum! Mean to say you didn't send us word that Warrego Dan was here, rolling in luxury, just waiting for us to skin him."

"I didn't! I swear——"

"Nor you didn't ask that young fella-my-lad Stoodley to pass the word, hey, same as he passed it to Chinkie Jane here——"

"Curse him! Stoodley did that?"

"So Jane says! He's a bright spark is Stoodley, an' seemingly too hot stuff for you, Harry. . . . It's no good running round an' round the track when you're out of the race, parson. It was you or Stoodley or both of you together, because you wanted to get even with Dan, or to steal a march on him of some sort. Dan isn't such a born fool as to go an' pass his address to us on the day we came out of the jug, an' there's only you an' Stoodley for it, unless this lady we brought along with us was so kind——"

"It's not me," quavered the woman. "If it's Dan Lyncourt you're talking about I—I didn't know he was alive. He—he—Saints! If he's hereabouts, let me go!" Her voice grew suddenly hysterical, and she shouted frantically: "Let me go!"

Let me go ! D'you hear, let me go ! Let me——”

She made some kind of a move which broke up the solidity of the group in front, and staring through the half-open doorway, Shortland saw the man who held her shake her into silence, and caught his harsh words.

“ Tie a knot in your tongue, Jane. . . . You'll have your chance all in good time, an' we'll hand you over to your lawful husband when we're through.”

A light broke on Shortland with the words. Remembering the despair of the man outside he conjectured the relationship between him and the bedraggled, haggard woman in the room ; but he had time to do no more than that, when Soulsby shot a question.

“ Where's Dan hanging out these nights ? ”

“ How should I know ? I'm not his keeper.”

“ No ! Maybe he's yours ! ” laughed Soulsby.

Over the shoulder of the speaker Shortland caught sight of Bayhurst's face, and knew that Soulsby's shot at a venture had found its target. Soulsby apparently realised the truth also, for he laughed again.

“ Hit the mark, Harry, hey ? You ain't Dan's keeper say you, an' I reckon that's the level truth. Dan's too big for you to hand-feed, but you—well you were always to be bought for other men's use in the old days, an' I reckon you ain't changed your speckles none in these twenty years, though your

feathers have grown a whole lot finer. . . . I guess you're Dan's man though you was willing to sell him, you an' that young rip Stoodley. . . . Now let's get the hang of things. That girl you have got here—your ward—is Dan Lyncourt's daughter, ain't she ? "

Mr. Bayhurst evidently saw that denial of the truth would not serve him and owned the fact.

" Yes."

" And you're sort of looking after her for Dan, hey ? "

" Well—"

" That's good enough. An' I reckon Dan's finding the dibs, ain't he ? " asked Soulsby shrewdly. The man whom he questioned failed to reply, and the ex-convict's voice took a sudden ferocious note.

" Answer, you holy worm, or I swear I'll tread on you till you squirm."

Mr. Bayhurst found it expedient to answer.

" Dan pays for the house and—er—everything."

" That means he's rolling in wealth. Must be to run a show like this—for the girl's sake; for I reckon it's dead certain he ain't doing it for yours. . . . I begin to get it now. You an' Stoodley were

crossing Dan—handing him the dirt, hey ? . . . You'd got your eye on his money, an' knowing it would go to the girl, you wanted us to put Dan out of the way, an' so passed us the word, meaning when we'd done the trick, which we nearly did, you'd slip into his shoes, Stoodley marrying the girl an' you——" He broke off his conjecturing of the other's motives quite sharply, and ejaculated :

" But there's one thing I don't get. Why did you send for this bundle of rags an' bones ? "

" I . . . I didn't ! "

" No ! She may be your wife, but Chinkie Jane don't fit in with this palace of luxury. She——"

Shortland caught his breath at the words, and at the same moment heard a gasp behind him. He turned swiftly round to find Lyncourt standing almost at his shoulder, a look of extreme amazement on his face. Fearing violent developments, he slipped back a step and put a restraining hand on the other's arm.

" For heaven's sake, Mr. Lyncourt——"

" S-s-s-h-h. Listen."

Lyncourt made no move to throw off his arm, but stared tensely into the room, and the younger man realising that there was no need for his apprehension gave his attention to the drama unfolding before him.

" Not my wife. She married Lyncourt——"

" Oh, you liar ! "

The interruption came from the woman, who made a spring forward but was hauled back by Soulsby as if she had been a dog. Then the man laughed brutally.

" I reckon Jane ought to know her lawful husband. She married Dan, I know, since I was at the wedding ; an' a gay old time we had. But Dan didn't know what Jane knew—that she'd been married before to the Revd. Henry Hippolyte Bayhurst. . . . I didn't know it then, an' not for five years afterwards, when

a fellow in the chain gang, who'd known Jane here let it out one fine day——” He broke off and addressed himself to the woman. “ I reckon you didn't bother to get a divorce before taking Dan, hey, Jane ? ”

“ No-o ! ” stuttered the woman. “ Didn't seem to be——”

“ Thank God ! Thank God ! ”

The words fervently whispered came from the man at Shortland's side, and looking at him swiftly he saw that Lyncourt's face was transfigured. A second later, Harlowe whispered :

“ Congratulations, Dan.”

“ I don't get it.” Soulsby was speaking again with a puzzled note in his voice. “ You didn't send for her, Harry, which ain't surprising, but Stoodley did. What for ? I want to know. . . . You an' he crossed Dan, I wonder if by any chance—— Flames ! That's it ! The young rip was crossing you too, putting a spoke in your wheels, Harry, whilst he made the running with the girl an' got away with Dan's money ! ”

“ He's hit the truth or I'm a Dutchman,” whispered Harlowe. “ And where is Stoodley ? ”

Soulsby grew suddenly energetic. Pushing the woman out of his way so violently that she staggered and only saved herself by clutching the table, he strode across the room, and gripping Bayhurst by the collar shook him to and fro.

“ Where's that girl ? ” he demanded. “ She's the key of this romantic situation. Where is she ? ”

"God knows!" stuttered Bayhurst.

"That don't help me. Where is she? Out with it, you white-livered chicken, or I swear I'll choke you."

"I—I don't know. She's been missing for hours. I thought you had her. I have been much worried about her."

"You would be. An' with reason—since she carries the money! . . . Then where is Stoodley? That young imp is too slick by half. We ain't set eyes on the girl; an' I reckon he's the fellow who knows, since he's playing the crooked game he is. Where is he, you holy rip? 'Out with it or—'"

He shook the other so savagely that his victim grew purple in the face, his eyes bulged and his teeth rattled, making it impossible for him to speak clearly, though his panic was so great that he made the endeavour.

"I . . . d-d-d-o-n't k-k-n-n-o—"

"You don't?" Soulsby was ferociously derisive. "Well you jolly soon will. André, give a hand. It won't take long to make the piece of blubber squeal."

With a grin wrinkling his evil face, the man André moved forward. In the same minute, realising that Soulsby had guessed the truth and that Stoodley represented the strategic point, Shortland transferred his interest to the latter. But where was he? He remembered the car he had seen at the side of the house. It did not belong to the three ruffians in the room, and it was possible that Arthur

Stoodley, who most certainly had passed the gates some time ago, was watching the proceedings and meant sooner or later to use that car. As he thought of it he was convinced that it was so, and whilst Soulsby again exhorted Bayhurst to save himself trouble, he whispered hurriedly to Harlowe that he was going outside to keep a look out for Stoodley, adding: "He may try to bolt."

"A good idea. All right. Dan and I will manage this lot and——"

He got no further. The room in front of them, the hall where they stood, the whole house as Shortland guessed, was plunged into sudden darkness. Someone, he divined, had turned off the main switch. He had no doubt as to who had done the thing, and as from the gallery above came the scream of frightened maids, and from the room in front sounds of pandemonium, he felt his way in the direction of the door. The darkness was so intense that when he found the door he fell down the steps, and as he picked himself up heard a voice shout wildly:

"Keep the door, Dandy! Don't let the fool get away!"

He began to move along the terrace. As he reached the window of the room where Bayhurst and the others were, instinctively he glanced into it, and in that very instant saw two spurts of flame follow each other swift as lightning flashes, and clearly through the swish of the storm, the shouting of men and the frenzied screaming of Chinkie Jane,

heard two reports of a pistol. The racket in the room grew, and that tragedy stalked there he had never a doubt, but he did not stop to investigate. His one thought was for Sybil, and convinced that Stoodley was the man who had the secret of her whereabouts, and that the waiting car was for his use, he hurried along the terrace as fast as he could. As he went a gust of wind caught his cap, lifting it from his head. He clutched at it wildly, but too late, and knowing the uselessness of searching in the dark, continued on his way.

When he reached the corner of the house, to his relief he found the car was still there; but now, whilst there were no lights on, the engine was running. Some person it seemed expected to use it in a hurry, and he had not the slightest doubt who it was.

For a second or two he stood listening. The cries from the house sounded more clearly. He distinctly caught Soulsby's voice, shouting orders.

"Quit! . . . No guns! . . . André, you damned fool—"

Men were running along the terrace now, and out of the darkness behind him there came the crash of a door. Someone, it seemed, was coming from the rear of the house. He remembered seeing Arthur Stoodley go that way earlier in the day, and cherished no doubt that he was the one using the side door. He slipped to the further side of the car. Should he grapple with Stoodley and—That might be little use. It would not reveal

Sybil's whereabouts, and it was important to discover that as soon as possible. There was a better way. To follow Stoodley—no! to go with him, in the hope that thus he might be brought in touch with the girl. Swifter than light, swift as thought, the considerations flashed through his mind, and he had but a fraction of time to reach his decision. Hurrying steps sounded on the gravel, and in the second that the sound reached him his mind was made up. Swiftly opening the rear door of the hooded car he slipped inside, and softly closing the door crouched low upon the mat. Scarcely had he bestowed himself when the running man reached the car, opened the front door, and flung himself in the driver's seat.

Crouched in the darkness behind, Shortland could see nothing, but he caught the man's gasping breath due either to haste or extreme emotion, and a second later as the engine accelerated and then stopped as the clutch was too hurriedly released, he heard him ejaculate impatiently :

“ Oh, curse the thing ! ”

The words gave him the knowledge he desired, for the voice was unmistakable. The man in the driver's seat was Arthur Stoodley. Assured of that, he crouched lower on the mat, and three seconds later the car began to move ; then, as the driver changed gears, slid smoothly and evenly forward, lamps unlit, taking all the risks the night might hold.

CHAPTER XV

A STOLEN RIDE

A SLIGHT swerve to the left and a difference in the sound made by the wheels on the road told Shortland that the car had passed the gates and was moving down hill. Then the lights were switched on, and they swung forward at a quickened pace. They passed Poundsgate, and a little later Shortland set his teeth as the car began to make the steep descent to Newbridge. Stoodley it seemed, was taking risks, for though he must have known the hill was posted as dangerous, he did not change into a lower gear, but contented himself with braking, and descended at a pace which made his unseen passenger shiver at the thought of what might happen if the brake failed.

But they made the level safely and swung forward towards the bridge. Just before they reached it Stoodley pulled up, opened the door, and was in the act of descending, when from ahead came the shriek of a klaxon, and the headlights of an oncoming car sent a broad, radiant beam through the rainy darkness. Its appearance, apparently, caused Stoodley to change his mind about leaving the car, for he slid back into his seat, closed the door, and moving forward crossed the bridge before the approaching car reached it.

As the car climbed the steep hill beyond, Shortland

wondered what had been in the driver's mind when he had stopped at the approach to the bridge. Had he any suspicion of his uninvited passenger? It seemed scarcely possible, yet that was a chance to be reckoned with, for Stoodley, as he had revealed, was as cunning as he was unscrupulous, and would probably go to considerable lengths to avoid any thwarting of the secret purpose which he was pursuing. In case of attack, a man on his knees in the confined space between two seats of a four-seater car was not in the best situation for defence, as he was acutely aware; but no other posture was possible without proclaiming himself openly, and whilst the matter was in doubt he must remain where he was.

The car droned heavily uphill between the silent woods, which for any deed of violence afforded deeper solitude than the lonely bridge itself; and reassured by the driver's continued indifference to his presence, Shortland began to think of what had happened at Harford. What had been behind the failure of the electric light? . . . Who had fired those two shots? At whom had they been directed, and had the bullets found their billets?

To these questions he, of course, found no certain answer; but with the dousing of the light, now, on sober reflection, as in the moment of the event, he associated the man sitting so apparently unconcerned in front of him. Not for a moment did he entertain the possibility of a mere fuse in some switch box—common as such a happening might be.

It had been too à propos for that. Someone, and that one not of the scared domestics, had switched off the whole lighting of the house at a crucial moment. And it had not been any of the three aggressors, nor Lyncourt nor Harlowe. Arthur Stoodley seemed to be the only other possibility, for unquestionably he had fled the house almost immediately after, and that seemed very significant.

It fostered suspicion that the darkness calculated to throw everything into confusion, had fallen just when Bayhurst was being pressed to reveal Stoodley's whereabouts. That the former had the knowledge seemed open to question, and if Arthur Stoodley had been secretly in the house, why had he so hidden himself? Was it because he had been afraid of Soulsby and the others, or had there been a nefarious purpose behind the concealment?

Again, had the sudden darkness been the occasion of the shots that he had seen and heard, or had it been a definitely sought opportunity? Put in plain speech, had the hand that turned the switch fired the pistol? Either alternative was as likely as the other. One of the three desperadoes, suspecting treachery with the quenching of the light, might have fired at random. Or on the other hand, someone seeking a man's life and desiring to remain unnoticed, after marking his quarry, might have turned the switch, that in the consequent confusion he might accomplish what was no better than assassination.

Again the question recurred. At whom had the

shots been directed? Harlowe and Dan Lyncourt? There had been two shots, and apparently, from the directions Soulsby had shouted, none of the three ex-convicts had suffered from them. . . . But the other two . . . and Bayhurst? The first contingency worried him a great deal, and a thought came to him that with the failure of the light Bayhurst himself, steeling his heart, might have fired the shots—either Bayhurst, or else one of the three convicts or Lyncourt.

The possibilities were too many even for a probable guess, and he forced his thought to other things. Where was Stoodley making for? And would Sybil be found at the journey's end? Again definite answers were not forthcoming. The road the car was following led to Ashburton, but the driver might turn on to the Plymouth road, or again he might continue through the little town, taking either the main Exeter road or the one leading to Newton and Torquay. There was no certainty possible until the destination was reached, but that Sybil would be found at the end was a conviction that would not be denied. The grounds for it might be slender, but crouching there in the bottom of the car, in his heart there was the belief that the conviction would be vindicated.

The car slowed down for a steep descent, and unable to see anything, Shortland told himself that they were nearing the river again, and would soon be crossing it at Holne Bridge. Half a minute later he caught the rush of the Dart in the rapids

above the bridge and knew that his judgment had been right. Then on the flat the car slowed down, and finally came to a halt a few yards from the bridge itself.

“What now?”

As Shortland asked himself the question he had an uncomfortable remembrance of the fact that the previous stop had been by a bridge over the river, and that Stoodley had been deflected from his purpose, whatever it was, by the approach of the other car. Had the man after all been foxing all the way from Harford Lodge? Was he aware of his presence in the car, and did he propose to get rid of him by knocking him on the head and throwing him into the hurrying river?

He heard the other open the door and leave the car, and crouched low, still as a mouse when the cat is watching its hole. If Stoodley opened the rear door of the car he himself must get in the first blow or be lost before he could spring to his feet. He waited tensely, breathlessly, until he caught the sound of retreating footsteps, then reassured, he drew breath and cautiously lifting his head looked through the windscreen. It was blurred with rain, the water streaming down, but through the clear arc made by the automatic screen-wiper he managed to descry the man's tall figure walking directly in the broad beam of light thrown by the headlamps.

Stoodley, it seemed, was going to the bridge; but for what was he going?

"Not to take the view, I'll wager," he whispered to himself, "for the night is as black as my hat."

He watched intently, saw Stoodley reach the low parapet of the bridge, and stand for a moment looking down at the rumbling water. Then from his pocket he took something which flashed in the beams of the headlights and dropped it into the river. For a moment he leaned with both hands on the parapet, apparently staring into the water as if trying to see the object he had dropped there. Whilst he was so engaged the sharp tuck-tuck of a motor-cycle coming up behind the car reached Shortland's ears, and as the flare of its lamp shining through the rear window lit up the car he ducked downward, crouching on the mat once more, lest Stoodley turning round should see him against the strong light.

The motor-cycle slackened speed and drew up within a yard or two of the car, its rider apparently a little curious why the car should be standing in that lonely place at so late an hour. Shortland, huddled close to the mat, waited a little breathlessly. If the motor-cyclist, thinking the car was deserted, made an inspection, discovery was inevitable, and whatever followed the purpose of his stolen ride would be thwarted.

The man however made no move, possibly because he had observed Stoodley on the bridge. A moment or two passed, then Shortland's straining ears caught the sound of footsteps, and he guessed that Stoodley was returning to the car.

"Good evening, sir," someone said in a voice that had an official ring, and in a tone half-interrogative, half-challenging.

"Oh, good evening, constable. It is a very dirty night."

"Very," agreed the other; and to Shortland appeared to be waiting for an explanation.

Apparently Stoodley had the same idea, for he laughed in frank amusement.

"You're wondering what on earth I am doing here at this time of night, constable? . . . Well I was merely taking a look at the river by night; and now I'm going. The water seems to have risen a whole lot since the rain began."

"Yes," answered the constable, whatever suspicions he might have had completely banished. "The Dart is like that. Quick to rise and quick to fall. A storm up on the moor means flood water down below. . . . Good-night, sir!"

"Good night, constable!"

The explosive tuck-tuck of the motor cycle commenced again and receded as Stoodley slid back to his place at the wheel.

"Phew!" he whistled and muttered to himself, "that was a near shave! If the beggar had seen——"

The sound of a match being struck followed, and a whiff of smoke proclaimed that he had lit a cigarette.

Then once more the car resumed its journey. Crouched on elbows and knees, with head well down,

Shortland revolved an interesting problem. What was that shining thing which Stoodley had dropped into the river? Why had he been so anxious to be rid of it; for on reflection it seemed clear that when he had stopped the car at Newbridge it had been his intention to drop it into the river at that point? And why was the constable's arrival a near shave? What was it that he might have seen?

He found the questions intriguing without discovering any very satisfactory answers. Stoodley certainly had desired to be rid of something in his possession at the earliest moment, and had consigned it to the deep waters of the Dart, no doubt with the thought that there it would be hidden for ever; but beyond that he could not go; and presently he gave up the attempt to answer his own questions and concentrated on the journey.

The dimmed lights of street lamps and the upper windows of houses in a narrow thoroughfare told him the car had reached Ashburton. Was this Stoodley's destination, or was he going further? A minute sufficed to answer the question. There was no slackening of the car's pace. Straight on it swept, left the narrow street behind, and in no time at all was racing along the open highway.

Where was Stoodley making for? He considered in turn the towns within reasonable distance—Newton, Bovey, Teignmouth, Torquay, Chudleigh, Exeter, but reached no finality. If, as he suspected, Stoodley were on his way to Sybil, any of these towns might be the rendezvous, always supposing

that the girl was a free agent; and if she were not, then none of them was likely, and some solitary place aside from the main road was the probable destination.

But the car kept the main highway, swept through silent villages at a rattling pace, and presently reached a place which, raising his head for a moment, Shortland recognised as Chudleigh.

"Exeter!" he whispered to himself.

But why was Stoodley going to Exeter? To meet Sybil of course. Not for a moment did Shortland question that—but why was Exeter in particular the rendezvous? Almost immediately his mind furnished an explanation. Because it was a cathedral town, and possibly a marriage license would be readily procurable there—certainly more easily than in the heart of Dartmoor. Soulsby's criminal acumen had gone to the heart of the situation, and unquestionably Stoodley had played for his own hand; bringing that woman to the Lodge to occupy Bayhurst's whole attention, whilst he himself achieved his purpose with Sybil.

By what means he had persuaded the girl to leave Harford was not difficult to guess. No doubt he had given some fresh turn to the screw he had already employed, and exploiting Sybil's fear for her father had, in spite of all, persuaded her to agreement. But what fresh turn had been possible? . . . Inspector David Harlowe? There he thought was the new lever! In spite of her promise to himself, her new fears had proved too strong and—

his thoughts took a sharp turn. Did she know of the shot fired on the moor that morning ; and had she been induced to believe that Lyncourt had been the would-be assassin ? . . . It was possible, no, likely ; and if Lyncourt himself had fired that shot, and had believed that the inspector was dead, it would have been an easy task to work upon the girl, and persuade her to consent to anything to obviate the consequences of that latest crime, the motive for which leaped to the eye.

As he considered these contingencies and thought of what Sybil must be suffering, wrath surged within him, so that he was tempted to rise from his knees and, clutching the other's throat, choke the truth out of him. The folly of that course however was patent ; and repressing his anger as best he could, he schooled himself to wait—Stoodley hurrying through the rainy night to triumph was carrying with him the means of his defeat ; for, once aware of Sybil's whereabouts, Shortland was convinced that he would be able to persuade her against Stoodley, by a mere recital of the facts.

Onward they swept. Once the car skidded violently on a stretch of slippery road, turning completely round, and throwing Shortland so heavily against the door that he thought Stoodley must have heard the noise of the impact. He waited tensely, prepared to spring up and throw himself upon the fellow if he should discover his presence in the car. But apparently Stoodley's whole attention had been taken up by the skid and the

attempt to correct it, for he did not so much as look round; but, turning the car, coolly resumed his way, driving a little more cautiously till they had passed the slippery stretch.

Lights from street lamps began to flash through the car windows. They became a continuous line, revealing that they had entered the city. The car's pace slackened, and through the night stillness of the streets came the chimes of some clock striking the hour. Having lost all account of time, Shortland listened carefully.

"One, two, three, four! One, two, three, four. One, two three, four. One, two, three, four! Boom!"

"One o'clock!" he told himself, and wondered in what circumstances he would find Sybil, and whether she would be glad to see him, even at this hour of the morning. Then he found himself picturing Stoodley's face when the denouement came; and derived a grim satisfaction at the thought of the other's savage chagrin at the thwarting of his plan almost in the hour of its fulfilment.

The car began to ascend a stiff hill, the High Street as Shortland guessed, reached the crest, turned, and two minutes later drew up outside what he divined must be an hotel. There was a little delay, then a man came into evidence giving Stoodley directions, and again the car moved slowly forward, turning into a garage yard.

"All right, sir! That will do. I will run her in for you."

"Very good! But don't put her where she will be blocked. I shall want her quite early in the morning, and perhaps you had better wipe her down and fill her up with petrol now if you don't mind."

"Very well, sir. I will attend to her."

Stoodley stepped out from the car, and then spoke to the man again.

"I suppose the night porter is on duty."

"Yes, sir."

"Then I'll go and have a word with him. Here's something for your extra trouble."

"Thank you, sir."

Steps sounded, receded, and died away; and Shortland crouched on the mat, wondering what his chances were of leaving his hiding place unnoticed. For the moment, assured that Stoodley would be staying at the hotel, he was not troubled by any thought of losing track of him; and he waited patiently, hoping that the man standing by the car might move away and afford him his opportunity. But apparently the man was in no hurry to oblige him. He stood where he was, apparently surveying the car, for Shortland heard him growl to himself.

"A dirty sixpence, and the car splashed to the hood. I'll want the hose—confound it."

Then quite suddenly the man moved, opening the door to the driver's seat, then closing it with a bang. A second later the catch of the rear door turned, and as the door opened, realising that discovery was inevitable, Shortland rose to his knees sharply as a jack-in-a-box.

The man outside was utterly startled by the apparition, and jumped back a pace ; then annoyed at the scare he had experienced, came forward, demanding truculently :

“ What the devil are you doing here ? ”

“ Been stealing a ride that the owner of the car wouldn’t have given me,” laughed Shortland cheerfully, and added quickly. “ Don’t make a row, my good fellow. I’ve a note in my pocket for you.”

The man looked at him doubtfully.

“ You’re a cool one. How am I to know that you were not going to steal the car ? ”

“ Don’t know at all,” answered Shortland, genially.

“ But you can be sure I shan’t steal it now.”

He produced a pound note and handed it to the man. A new respect came into the latter’s manner as he took the note.

“ Well,” he admitted, “ there’s no harm done. What the eye don’t see the heart don’t grieve about, an’ I reckon most men would steal a lift if they needed it on a shocking night like this.”

“ Yes,” agreed Shortland, stepping out into the yard and stretching himself. “ And I needed the lift, a pretty long one from the edge of Dartmoor, so I stole it.” He laughed as he added—“ The owner of that car would have kicked me out neck and crop if he’d known I was here.”

“ Um ! He’s that sort is he ? . . . I might have guessed it. Wipe her down an’ fill her up, says he, and hands me sixpence for the extra trouble. Mighty mean sort I reckon.”

" Well, my note will console you. But for heaven's sake don't let on that you saw me."

" No fear, sir. . . . But your hat? Is it in the car?"

" No. I lost it before I got in. . . . I suppose I can get a room in the hotel?"

" Certain sure. We aren't more than half full."

" Well, I'll try in a minute or two after my friend has cleared out of the way. I don't want to run against him you understand. I'll just smoke a cigarette and give him time to get to his room. . . . " "Have one?"

He offered his case, and the man accepting, they stood chatting and smoking for a short time, then the man offered to ascertain if the coast was clear.

" I shall be very glad if you will," answered Shortland.

The other went off, and was away for what seemed to Shortland quite a long time. When he returned there was a puzzled grin on his face.

" Nothing to keep you here, sir. The gentleman booked a room and then went out."

" Went out?"

There was consternation in Shortland's tones as he echoed the words. Had he after all missed the object of his uncomfortable journey. The possibility filled him with apprehension; and he stared at the man blankly, whilst the latter answered.

" Yes, sir! That's what the night porter says. The gentleman said that he was two hours late for

an engagement that he was bound to keep, so off he went."

The necessity for action made Shortland suddenly energetic.

"Look here," he said quickly, "the porter is a friend of yours I expect. Do you think I could get a word with him?"

"Of course, sir. Come this way."

Shortland accompanied him and entering the hotel by a side entrance made the acquaintance of the night porter. He wasted no time in preliminaries, but went straight to the point.

"I want a little information, for which I am willing to pay before it is given."

"Anything I can do, sir——"

"Well, there's a start."

Another pound note changed hands, and whilst the man was thanking him effusively, Shortland broke in:

"Did the man who has just registered say where he was going?"

"No, sir! First thing he asked when he came in was whether a certain lady had booked a room here."

"Ah—the lady was Miss Lyncourt!"

"Yes sir, that was the name. But there's no Miss Lyncourt here. . . . But there was a letter for the gentleman in a lady's handwriting delivered here by hand just when I came on duty; and when I gave it to him, he read it, laughed and said he must go out at once."

"Did he say when he would return?"

"Said he wasn't sure, and that I needn't get my hair off if he didn't happen to come back before the milk was delivered, then off he went."

Shortland stood there in a quandary, uncertain what to do, his apprehension mounting to fever pitch. Then he spoke: "Book me a room, and get me a drink—a double whisky and soda, and one for yourself and your friend here if you like."

"Yes, sir. Any luggage?"

"No!"

"Then, sir, a deposit is customary——"

"Yes. I understand. How much?"

He paid the sum demanded, and after pushing the register and pen and ink before him, the man departed to get the drinks. When he returned he looked at the register and nodded.

"All in order, sir. Number of the room is 21. When you're ready I'll show you——"

"I shan't want the room yet. Like Mr. Stoodley, I've got to go out and don't know when I shall be in. But you can oblige me infinitely if you will."

"Yes, sir?"

"I want a list of the principal hotels in the city, particularly those where a young lady alone would be likely to choose."

"I'll do my best, sir. And maybe I can help you another way. I know most of the night men who are on duty and I might telephone——"

"Man, you're a godsend. Do! I shall be glad to pay for the service you will render me that way."

. . . But give me the list first. I may have luck on my own."

"Yes, sir!"

The man took a sheet of notepaper, wrote for a little time, and then handed it over. "There, sir, that's fairly complete, and I've put down one or two of the more select private hotels, though I don't think you'll find any of them with open doors at this time."

"No! But get busy with the telephone. I will be back presently. And if Mr. Stoodley returns, please don't mention that I have been inquiring about him."

"No, sir! Harris and I will be secret as the grave."

Shortland took up his glass and drained it, and as the garage attendant lifted his he gave the conventional :

"Here's luck, sir!"

"Luck!" thought Shortland as he turned and went out into the empty street. "All the bad luck in the world is mine to-night."

Then he braced himself for what, in the bones of him, he felt was the most hopeless quest of his life.

CHAPTER XVI

A CLEVER TRICK

HE had gone but a little way when a new idea occurred to him. The porter's offer to make telephonic inquiry for Sybil at as many hotels as possible had obviated any necessity for him to make personal calls, and he saw another line of inquiry that might prove even more useful. The idea took him hot-foot to the house of his old friend the canon, whom he had consulted for information about Bayhurst.

As was to be expected at such an hour, he found the house in complete darkness. As he climbed the steps he was conscious of some compunction at the thought of rousing an old man from his sleep, but necessity made him ruthless and setting his thumb to the bell-push he pressed long and hard, his eyes fixed on the upper windows, his ears straining for any sound of movement within the house.

After a considerable interval a light showed in one of the rooms, the curtain was dragged aside, and the window opened. Then a voice inquired :

“ Who is there ? What do you want ? ”

Shortland was aware of a surge of relief as, recognising his friend's voice, he gave his name, for with luck running so ill he had feared that he might find the canon away from home.

"One moment, Guy, and I will be with you."

He waited, staring up and down the empty street, until a light gleaming through the fanlight told him that his friend was at hand. The door opened, and the old priest, courteous in spite of his broken sleep, welcomed him cheerfully.

"Come in, my boy, I am glad to see you, though you have wrecked my beauty sleep."

He closed the door and led the way to a study where the remains of a log fire still glowed. His first care was to thrust the logs together and throw on them a few chips; his second—to fish a decanter and syphon and glasses from a cupboard and help both himself and his guest.

"You look as if you need a stimulant," he remarked genially, "and a second nightcap won't hurt an old man."

The claims of hospitality fulfilled, he looked at Shortland, and a little diffidently, as if reluctant to force a confidence, asked:

"What is it, Guy? You seem troubled, and I am sure that only something very important would bring you here at this hour—and in the state you are. . . . You look as if you had been dragged through a mill pond."

"I have been in Dartmoor rain for hours," explained Shortland, "and I have ridden from Pounds-gate to the city hidden at the bottom of another man's car without his knowledge. I am afraid I am rather a scarecrow, but that is nothing. I want information, and I want it urgently, though you

may regard the matter as too trivial to justify my intrusion——”

The old man smilingly lifted deprecating hands.

“ My dear Guy ! ” he protested. And then inquired : “ Not about our friend Henry Hippolyte, hey ? ”

“ No. It is a matter of life and death to me.”

“ Ah ! I knew it must be important. Tell me ! ”

“ It is about a marriage license. I have a foggy idea about them of course, but I want exact information as to who issues them, where they may be used, and how one may discover what special licenses have been recently issued in the city.”

“ Marriage licenses ! ”

As he made the ejaculation the canon stared at his caller a little wonderingly, then the ghost of a smile crept into his grave eyes. “ Well, now ! . . . Well ! ”

“ I know the purpose of my coming here might seem to you vexatiously trivial, but I assure you that to me it is tremendously important. If you will listen I will tell you what is behind it all,” said Shortland earnestly.

Rapidly he gave a brief outline of the situation. The priest listened with growing interest, and at the end asked a question.

“ You think that this man Stoodley designs to marry the lady to-morrow—I mean this morning ? ”

“ I feel it in my bones ! ”

The canon nodded. “ Yes, it seems possible. But there is one thing in your favour and that is

that the earliest legal hour for marriage in this country is eight o'clock. You have till then to discover the truth, and the church where the marriage ceremony will take place. If it is by license I can help you—not at the moment, but by seven o'clock this morning. I am more than reluctant to drag a man from his bed at this hour to ask for information on a matter of which he may chance to know nothing. If a bishop's license has been issued the man I am thinking of will know, and as to-day is St. Luke's day he will be at early communion, before which I can arrange to see him——”

“ If you would——”

“ I certainly will. And I will have the information here by seven o'clock——”

“ I don't know how to thank you, canon.”

“ No need. I am happy to have the chance of doing my good deed so early in the day.” The priest smiled. “ But there is a contingency that you have not thought of. If this marriage is arranged to take place by special license—that is by the Archbishop's license issued through his Vicar-General—there will be no news of it available here, and if there were we should not know the place. Also there is the possibility that the marriage may be by banns in some out-of-the-way parish in the diocese. Residence of one of the parties—Arthur Stoodley say—would make that possible; and residence, you know, is a fairly elastic term. Either of these contingencies would make things difficult for you.”

"Yes. I see that, and that makes it necessary that I should find out where Miss Lyncourt is before daylight."

"Or where Stoodley is."

"I know where he is likely to be found before long. But it is Sybil's whereabouts I must learn."

"Yes, of course."

"If you will excuse me now. . . . I think I must go. But I will be here at seven o'clock precisely."

"And I will have the information you require—if there is any."

"Thank you, canon," said Shortland, rising. "I am deeply in your debt."

"Tush ! Tush, boy . . . where is your hat ? "

"Somewhere in Bayhurst's grounds. I lost it there."

"I'm afraid mine are little use to you, besides being of clerical pattern."

"No matter ! I often go without a hat."

Two minutes later he was back in the deserted street. The rain had ceased, but the night was very dark, and the only illumination came from a few street lights which were kept burning through the small hours. Under one of these he encountered a policeman, who looked at him a little suspiciously, but did not speak, and presently he was in the High Street. There, where the light was better, he encountered another policeman, and a little way down on the other side of the road he saw a man walking rapidly towards him.

When the man passed a street light Shortland's

heart leaped with sudden excitement. The man had his coat collar up and his hat brim down, but in spite of these facts he had no doubt of the man's identity.

"Stoodley," he whispered to himself, and as the man passed he turned in his tracks, and began to shadow him.

He repassed the second policeman, now standing in a shop doorway, without noticing him, but the officer, peering round the corner of the doorway, watched him with interest.

With perhaps twenty yards between them the two continued up the street for some distance, then Stoodley, with a single glance swiftly over his shoulder, crossed the road and dived down a narrow way leading to the cathedral. Afraid of missing him, Shortland hurried forward, and as he took the turn had an impression that the other was watching him in the darkness at the end of the alley-like way. He was not sure, but to turn abruptly back would certainly arouse Stoodley's suspicion, and either to slacken pace or to stop and stare in one of the unlighted windows would do no less. So, very glad of the darkness, he moved forward, maintaining the pace at which he had turned the corner. Before he reached the end of the alley the man whom he had so imperfectly seen had vanished, but there was a sound of running feet in the direction of the close.

He himself started to run, making as little noise as possible, following the steps ahead of him. He ran

so far but a little way. The sounding steps in front ceased suddenly, and he himself halted, uncertain what course to pursue. In the very shadow of the cathedral he stood debating what to do. Either Stoodley had become aware that he was being trailed, and having halted was waiting for him in the shadows, or he had somehow turned aside and was lost to him.

The first possibility did not daunt him, for he was not averse from an immediate interview with the blackmailer, whilst the second was a spur urging him on in the pursuit. He began to move forward, swiftly and silently, and had gone less than a dozen yards when a strong hand gripped him, and a savage voice fairly hissed :

“ Now, my fine fellow, what’s your game ? ”

“ Nothing unlawful, Mr. Arthur Stoodley. And I shall feel obliged if you—— ”

He got no further. A face was thrust suddenly near his own, then in a tone of utter amazement Stoodley whispered hoarsely :

“ You ! Hell’s blazes ! How did you come here ? ”

“ In a car ! ”

“ The devil you did ! ”

The man’s voice, though still low, had a savage ring that warned Shortland of his danger. He jerked to break the other’s hold on him, succeeded too well, for he staggered against some railings, and before he could recover Stoodley delivered a couple of ferocious blows which completed his discomfiture,

one over the heart, driving him against the railings with such force that, as he rebounded, he collapsed to the stones in a half-fainting condition.

“That will teach you, you——”

Only dimly he was aware of Stoodley's savage tone, the toe of a boot in his ribs was too excruciating to allow attention for small things, then a light flashed dazzlingly and a voice speaking with authority rallied him a little.

“That will do, sir. It's not permitted to take the law into your own hands no matter what the provocation. And there's no need you should. I've been following the ruffian. I saw him shadowing you from the High Street. I guess it is a case of attempted robbery with violence. . . . If you'll come to the office and charge him——”

Stoodley gave a sudden, sharp laugh.

“If you think it necessary, constable. I've given him a fair dose of medicine.”

“It's a duty, sir, as a citizen, I mean. This sort of scoundrel is better behind bars.”

“Very well, I'll go with you, officer.”

Quite suddenly the meaning of what was taking place broke on Guy Shortland's shaken senses, and in a lightning-like flash of understanding he grasped Stoodley's intention. Suspecting that his purpose had been discovered he proposed to use the law to prevent any interference with his plans. That realisation braced him like a plunge in icy water. With an effort he rose to his feet, and as he did so the constable spoke sharply.

"You'll come quietly, my man, or it will be the worse for you."

"Don't be a fool, constable," said Shortland, stretching a hand to the railings to steady himself. "I'm no thief, and if anyone is to be arrested that is the man—for unprovoked assault."

"Brazen as they make 'em, officer," laughed Stoodley.

"Sounds so!" agreed the constable. "He's sure got a nerve on him. But he can tell all the lies he wants at the office." He gripped Shortland's arm as he spoke. "You come along—an' no violence. Resisting an officer in performance of his duty'll only make it the worse for you."

Sheer despair surged in Shortland at the man's words. He saw all the contingencies of the situation. The ridiculous charge itself was nothing. Once his identity was established it would melt like snow in the sun. At most it meant a few hours' detention at the police station, but in that few hours, unless he had utterly misread the situation, Stoodley's purpose would be accomplished, and Sybil would be utterly lost to himself. His despair moved him to fresh efforts.

"Constable, you're all wrong. Here's my pocket-book. Open it and you will find my card. There's a driving license there too, which will prove my identity. You are making a bad mistake, and I warn you——"

"You can do that at the station," interrupted

the officer. "Are you coming quietly, or must I handcuff you?"

"Well, you lunatic," cried Shortland, moved to exasperation, "if I must I will; but I promise you, you will suffer for this."

"Bluff, officer," remarked Stoodley with a laugh. "But you're too sharp to let him get away with it."

"I hope so," said the policeman modestly. "Come along, you!"

His grip on the prisoner's arm tightened. He gave a jerk which broke Shortland's hold on the railing, and began to march forward. Recognising the futility of it, Shortland made no resistance. After all, the man was but a street constable, whose authority would last only until they reached the station, where in all probability there would be someone of higher rank with the intelligence to realise the mistake the man had made.

With the constable on one side and Stoodley on the other he went quietly forward. When they came under a street lamp he was aware of Stoodley's eyes watching him with malicious amusement, but suppressing the rage it provoked in him, he gave no sign, but busied his mind with the thought of what he would do when they arrived at the police station. The journey took but a little time, and within five minutes he was standing in the presence of a rather sleepy station sergeant, who, listening to the constable's account of what had happened, was quickened to complete wakefulness.

"Um! Sounds like a bad case!" he commented,

then turned to Stoodley. " You're going to charge him, sir ? "

" Of course. The man assaulted me, no doubt meaning to rob me, but I was too good for him."

" Lucky for you," said the sergeant. " If you will give me your name and address, sir ? "

Stoodley obliged, and when the sergeant had written it down he addressed himself to Shortland, giving the stereotyped warning, before asking his name.

Shortland gave his name without comment, and, surprising a doubtful look in his interrogator's face as he heard it, divined that the man was not unfamiliar with it.

" Um ! . . . Anything to say for yourself before you're put away for the night ? "

" Quite a lot," answered Shortland quietly. " If, as you voice it, you put me away for the night on this absurd charge there will be a good deal of trouble for someone to-morrow. You have my name and address. It will be perfectly easy to verify them."

" Not at this hour," snapped the sergeant.

" Nor at any, I fancy," sneered Stoodley.

" Well, here is my pocket book. It has two or three letters in it, and there is my driving license issued by the Nottingham County Council."

" Stolen, I expect, sergeant," intervened Stoodley.

" Very likely, sir," agreed the officer, then addressed himself to his prisoner. " Makes no difference, my man. If you are the man you say

you can prove it to the magistrates come morning, but till then it's a cell or a station chair for you."

"But if I find a friend to bail me out?"

"Can't be done to-night. I wouldn't take the responsibility—the charge being a serious one. . . . Besides who can you get at this hour?"

"Canon Marnhull," answered Shortland promptly, "and if one surety is not sufficient I think Archdeacon Powys would stand."

"That old crank!" the sergeant laughed. "Well, you should interest him, but whether he would stand for you is another horse."

"You will send for them?"

"Not now. If you insist, come daylight—"

"No! Now! If you keep me here you will be aiding a great wrong. I warn you—"

"A good actor, sergeant," laughed Stoodley.

"But not quite good enough," the officer laughed back, and then addressed the constable.

"Just take the keys and open the door of Number 3, Vowler."

"No need for me to wait any longer, sergeant, I suppose?" asked Stoodley.

"No, sir. We shall know where to find you to-morrow."

"A little awkward for me," answered Stoodley, with his eye on Shortland. "I'm due to be married at eight o'clock, and I want to go away almost immediately."

The sergeant whistled. "That is awkward. . . . But maybe we can manage without you, sir. I

understand that Constable Vowler witnessed the whole affair."

" Most of it, sergeant," agreed the constable.

" I'll let you know if you are wanted, Mr. Stoodley. It all depends on the view the magistrates take."

" Very good ! Then I'll go. Good night, sergeant. Good night, constable."

" Good night, sir."

And his eyes flashing again with malicious amusement as he passed Shortland, Mr. Stoodley took his way to the street.

" Now, my man, come this way," said the sergeant briskly.

" No ! I'll be d——d if I will," answered Shortland rebelliously.

" It's no good making trouble——"

" It is you who are doing that, and believe me sergeant, you are making it good and plenty. . . . You haven't given me a chance so far. But now you have just got to listen to me and take notice of my demands."

The sergeant frowned. " I've got to——"

" That is what I said ! Take that pocket book of mine and go through it, first. . . . Count the paper money in it."

" Well——"

" Count it, confound you," broke in Shortland impatiently.

The sergeant, more impressed by his prisoner's manner than he cared to own, obliged.

" How much ? "

"Two fivers and seven pound treasury notes."

"Well, I ask you, is a man with that amount in his pocket going about this city at this hour looking for anyone whom he may rob?"

"Um—"

"Now look at those letters and that driving license!"

The sergeant examined the documents in question, and answered a little grudgingly: "They tally with the name you give, certainly. But that gentleman who accused you suggested you had stolen—"

"That gentleman is a filthy blackmailer wanted by the Australian police. That is news to you, I daresay, but it happens to be a fact. . . . Now look at my watch." He detached a gold hunter-watch from its chain as he spoke and pushed it in the sergeant's hand.

"Open it! It is a presentation watch. It has an inscription inside the case. I know you'll say I stole that too, but when you've read it you may examine the woven name tabs on my socks and shirt. A pickpocket doesn't usually strip a man to the skin and annex his personal raiment."

An uncomfortable look came on the sergeant's face as he considered the back of the watch, and his manner betrayed doubt.

"The socks," said Shortland, with a laugh. "I insist. I am giving you every chance."

He put his foot on a station bench and hitched a trouser leg. The sergeant, very red in the face, stooped over the woven name tab, read it almost

perfunctorily, and when he looked up his discomfort had manifoldly increased. There was a dawning respect in his manner.

"Well, sir——" he began, broke off, and then blurted: "What the deuce is the meaning of it all?"

"That I will tell you—in part. . . . You heard that blackguard say that he is going to be married in the morning? Well, that is the fact—unless I can prevent the wedding. The lady is my affianced wife, whom he has blackmailed into consent, and whom I came to Exeter to-night to find, riding, all unknown to him, in the back of that scoundrel's car."

"Where did you come from?"

"Poundsgate on Dartmoor! When we got here I lost the fellow, though I registered at the same hotel——"

"Name of the hotel, sir?"

Shortland gave it, and continued: "When I met him again I was returning from seeing my friend Canon Marnhull, whom I dragged out of his bed in order to obtain information as to whether that scoundrel had taken out a marriage license that I might learn where the wedding is to be held. You can verify that right now if you choose, but it would be a pity to break an old man's sleep twice in one night, and there is evidence as good. At the hotel I made inquiry about the Exeter hotels as I wanted to find the lady if I could. I got a list from the night porter——" He broke off and, searching

his pockets, produced it. "Here it is ! It was my intention to make inquiry at such as had night attendants, but the porter undertook to help me by telephoning the inquiry. He may have news for me. I pray to heaven that he has. But, anyhow, he will be able to verify my story even to the manner of my arrival in Exeter. You have a telephone there. I suggest—"

The suggestion was not necessary, for the sergeant was already unhooking the receiver and lifting a finger towards the automatic dial plate. In half a minute he was snapping questions, and though he could not hear the answers, listening to the questions, Shortland's confidence grew. Then quite sharply the sergeant asked :

" Hey ! What's that ? Repeat please."

Apparently he found the repetition more than interesting, for an amazed look came on his face, and after another question, the purport of which was not clear to Shortland, he hung up the receiver, and turned towards his prisoner.

" I shan't detain you, Mr. Shortland. I have no doubt of the truth of your story, and there is no need to call on your friend the canon to identify you. The constable made a mistake, as I am glad to believe, being deceived by Stoodley. You are quite at liberty to go, for I am certain the charge will not be proceeded with."

" Thank you, sergeant. You might oblige me. Had the porter any news of Miss Lyncourt ? I heard you ask—"

"None! He drew blank everywhere." For a second the sergeant hesitated, then added: "He had some other very interesting news, however."

"Ah!"

"About Stoodley! He must have gone straight from here to the hotel and secured his car——"

"Gone?" cried Shortland, apprehensively.

"Yes, I regret to say. Five minutes ago. You don't happen to know the number of the car? . . . I think I should like to see Mr. Stoodley again."

"You never will now—until it is too late! God help Sybil!" cried Shortland, dropping into a chair, his whole demeanour eloquent of despair.

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE CHURCH GATES

THE sergeant, much out of countenance, stared at his late prisoner with worried eyes.

“ Is it as bad as that, sir ? ”

“ It could hardly be worse,” answered Shortland tartly. “ You and that fool constable between you have given that villain a start that can’t be made up, and between you you have gone a long way to ruin a girl’s life. . . . You have got to find that man before eight in the morning or there is going to be big trouble for someone. The constable suggested the charge, which was a preposterous one, and Stoodley only took it up because it favoured his purpose. He wanted to get me out of the way—”

“ I see that now. . . . But that man, though he is out of sight, isn’t by any means out of the wood. The constable made an honest mistake, but Stoodley knew that the charge was false—and a false charge is a serious thing. We made a mistake, and I will do my best to see matters rectified—”

“ Man, you can’t undo the harm you have done ! ”

“ Pardon me, sir. The harm isn’t done yet. The marriage isn’t until eight o’clock, and there is plenty of time to scotch it yet. If I can manage to stop it Stoodley won’t be married as soon as he thinks. I’ll have him arrested even at the altar,

though I'm broke for it. You can leave that part to me. There'll be an inspector here at six o'clock—a friend of mine—who'll have authority beyond mine, and between us we'll see to things. It won't take us half an hour to find out what weddings are arranged to take place in the city to-day——”

“ But if it is outside the city ? ”

“ Well, that is a bit of a corker, sir, I'll own. We can't rake the county for news of weddings, at any rate not in the time. Unless we can get wind of Stoodley or of Miss Lyncourt, I am afraid we are rather helpless if the case should be as you suggest.”

“ It seems almost certain. Stoodley has gone off in his car. That indicates a journey of some distance——”

“ Or a mere change of hotels,” interrupted the officer. “ That is a possibility. He would know that the charge brought against you would not stand investigation, and possibly anticipate what has happened. But it was sufficient for his purpose that you were put temporarily out of action and thrown off his track. If the fellow is what you say—a blackmailer——”

“ He is that. I can get you the testimony of a retired Australian police inspector to that.”

“ Then, as I was about to say, he has a nerve to come here and use the police to further his ends. . . . I don't like to be taken in—no man does—and Mr. Stoodley shall pay for this little game, if I can get hold of him. And I'll have a good try. If he's

in the city I'll have track of him before daylight. . . . You go to your hotel, sir, and get a little rest, you look as if you needed it badly. I'll get busy. If that rascal has merely changed hotels I'll know it within an hour, and maybe I shall find the lady too. If you wouldn't mind giving me her full name."

"Miss Sybil Lyncourt."

The sergeant wrote it down and spoke again.

"A description might be helpful, sir. It is possible to register under a false name, and though it is an offence it is done every day. But young, single ladies in hotels are not so common as men, and it is possible we can find the lady under any name. I don't suppose there are more than a dozen young ladies alone in all the hotels in this city. So if you'll oblige, sir."

Shortland obliged willingly, and when the description was completed the sergeant beamed.

"Pretty comprehensive, sir. I believe I should know the lady at sight. . . . You can leave it to me now. If we get wind of Stoodley he will be brought in—on suspicion and the false charge business; and if we hear of the lady you shall know at once, and you will have the chance to go to her."

"Thank you, sergeant. I will be at the hotel until a quarter to seven, when I am to go to Canon Marnhull's. I will call here on the way back, in case you should have heard something in the interval."

"Very good, sir. I hope we shall be able to serve you and make up for the annoyance you have suffered. . . . Er . . . your hat. I don't see it about."

"No. It isn't here. I lost it up Poundsgate way. I must get another when the shops open. Good night—or perhaps I should say 'Good morning.'"

"Matter of taste, sir, being both night an' morning I'll say 'good night,' myself."

A little relieved at the prospect of police aid, Shortland took his way to his hotel ; heard first-hand the abortive result of the night porter's efforts ; and giving strict injunctions that he was to be called at a quarter to six, went to his room and to bed. Tormented as he was by anxiety for Sybil, sleep was utterly impossible, and he spent the time until dawn going over the events of the night, worrying himself with questions to which there was no answer, and pricked by the necessity to be up and doing, when in fact there was nothing that could be done.

At the first sign of daylight he rose, borrowed toilet requisites from the management, and having washed and dressed, punctual to the moment took himself to the house of Canon Marnhull. The first sight of the cleric's face dashed any hope he might have entertained.

"I am sorry, Guy. There is no news of any license of recent issue. So there is no help for you there."

Shortland set his teeth grimly. No ! Nor anywhere else, I am afraid. Excuse me, canon, I

must go. I'm awfully obliged to you and all that, but——”

“ Won't you breakfast with me, my boy ? ”

“ Breakfast ! . . . I feel as if I should never eat again.”

In great stress of mind he turned abruptly on his heel and walked straight to the police office. There the sergeant, now off duty but waiting to see him, met him with a long face.

“ No news, sir, of any use. Stoodley didn't go to any hotel in Exeter, the lady does not appear to have stayed at one, and there isn't a marriage arranged to take place at any church in all Exeter to-day.”

“ The registrar's office——” began Shortland.

“ We thought of that, sir ; and I had an interview with the registrar himself ten minutes ago. Drew that covert blank also. That wedding is not to be in Exeter, and unless Stoodley was just joshing——”

“ He wasn't ! I'm sure of that. He was in earnest.”

“ Then the ceremony is somewhere in the country, and I don't see how we are to find out where ? I'm sorry, sir, but we've done our very best, and what else we can do isn't clear.”

“ Nothing, I imagine—in time to be of use,” answered Shortland stonily. “ I'm much obliged for your help. If I hear anything I will let you know.”

He left the office, and with the aimlessness of a

man who has surrendered all hope, walked slowly along the street. As he did so a clock chimed the quarter, and he told himself that in less than an hour Sybil would be the wife of Arthur Stoodley—unless Fate intervened. But there was not one chance in a thousand of such intervention, and in deep gloom, tortured by a sense of utter helplessness, he walked on until he reached his hotel ; and there, the better to think, sought the room he had occupied, the window of which overlooked the hotel garage.

As he sat crouched in the single chair the room boasted, the gloom of his mind became utter darkness, which now and again was lit by lightning flames of half insane purpose. He could not save Sybil from this disastrous marriage, but he could deliver her from the life of wretchedness that must follow it. Sooner or later he would find Stoodley, even though he followed him to the ends of the earth, and then—

The thought stopped there—at the edge of an abyss—where lay a horrible thing that he could not put into words. But since it was the only way in which he could deliver Sybil he would take it, in scorn of law and consequence, and—

Voices from the yard below impinged on his dark thoughts. He heard them quite clearly, but his mind scarcely comprehended the words.

“ Thank heaven ! . . . I can have the taxi at once ? ”

“ In five minutes, sir ! ”

“ That will do,” answered a mild voice. “ Would

you believe it, I have been to three garages in succession and found them closed."

"Well, sir, it is a bit early."

"But not for me. I have to be at Dunsford by eight o'clock to officiate at a marriage ceremony for my friend the vicar there, who has been taken ill in the night, and I should not care to keep the happy pair waiting. It is my boast that I have never been late at a wedding or a funeral."

"We all like to do our best for wedding couples," laughed the man. "T'other sort don't matter so much, being beyond reach of such mortal anxiety as time can cause a man, particularly when he misses a train."

A thought occurred to Shortland that brought him sharply to his feet. What if Fate had intervened after all and offered the one chance in a thousand? An irrational but wholly irresistible conviction that it was so assailed him. Under its compulsion he ran down the stairs and made the yard just as the driver was backing the taxi-cab towards the street. A mild-looking elderly clergyman was standing well aside watching the manœuvre, and to him Shortland hastily addressed himself.

"Sir! I overheard you say you were going to Dunsford."

"Yes. That is so," answered the clergyman.

"It chances that I am particularly anxious to get there myself as early as possible. You, I gather have hired the hotel taxi, and I do not see another about. I wonder if you would have any objection

to my sharing it with you and letting me have the pleasure of paying the whole charge."

" You may share the vehicle with pleasure, but I do not think I can allow you to pay the whole——"

" Sir, I must ! I can do nothing less. You——" he laughed with a touch of excitement which made the clergyman look at him oddly. " You—why you are my luck penny."

The clergyman permitted himself to smile. " I have been many things in my time—the apostolic all things to all men, you comprehend—but this is the first time I have been any man's luck penny."

" Perhaps I should have said luck-bringer. All night I have been troubled about a matter, which will be settled at Dunsford, and I feel in my heart that it will have a happy ending. If I go you must permit me to pay——"

" Well, if I must, I must ! And there is the driver signalling me. Let us go."

Guy Shortland went eagerly enough. He was making a gambler's throw, backing his luck ; but he had something more than a gambler's faith, and would have staked his very life on the venture. He could not be making a mistake. The thing was an intuition—one of those apprehending flashes of the spirit as irresistible as sheer certainty, and more powerful to inspire action. If it were wrong then the whole world of the soul was a lie.

The clergyman, seating himself in his corner, produced a pipe and a morning paper.

" You will excuse me if I read ? I customarily

scan the paper at breakfast, but this morning breakfast was ahead of the newsagent."

"Please do not mind me at all, sir."

The cleric lit his pipe, and spread wide the newspaper. Shortland chanced to note that it was the *Western Morning News*, and then lighting a cigarette gave himself up to thought. When he found Sybil, almost certainly Stoodley would be with her, and there would be a scene. Having come so near achievement the man would not give up without an effort. No doubt he would lie freely, bluster, threaten, possibly be violent; but when Sybil had heard the story that he himself could tell her, there would be an end of Arthur Stoodley and his nefarious project. Liking the man little, Sybil would turn from him with loathing and scorn——

"Dear me! What a very dreadful thing!"

The interruption of his thoughts came from the clergyman, on whose benevolent face was a look of horror.

"What——"

"There has been a most mysterious murder near Poundsgate, a place I know very well."

"Poundsgate!" Shortland was assailed by a foreboding of disaster, and his voice shook as he echoed the name. "I know the place. Just now I have a house at Holne. When did the thing happen?"

"Late last night, apparently. Perhaps you knew the murderer—a Mr. Bayhurst."

"Bayhurst! Yes! I knew him—I had me

him once or twice. How did the thing happen? Who——”

“It is not known. The account is brief, but it seems a most mysterious affair. . . . Perhaps knowing the poor man, you would like to read the story for yourself.”

“Thank you. I should. Naturally, I am interested.”

To himself, as he spoke, his voice was strained and unnatural, and as he took the paper his hand was shaking; but the clergyman noticed nothing, and indicated the place.

“There on the fifth page.”

The direction was not needed. As he looked at the paper the thing leaped out at him.

“MYSTERY OF A DARTMOOR MANSION.

“MURDER IN A LONELY HOUSE.

“Just as we go to press there is news of a most mysterious occurrence at Poundsgate, a Dartmoor hamlet, known to thousands of holiday-makers who frequent the moor in the summer months. The details as yet are meagre, but it appears that some time after eleven o'clock last night, Mr. John Smale, a farmer, was awakened by a frantic knocking at his outer door. On answering the summons he was astonished to find two maid-servants from Harford Lodge, a pretentious mansion standing in extensive grounds something under a mile from the hamlet. The maids, who

were bordering upon collapse, told a confused, incoherent and hysterical story of a shooting occurrence which had taken place at the Lodge, and though they were in no condition to give details, it was clear to Mr. Smale that something unusually tragic had happened.

"After calling his wife and delivering the girls into her care, Mr. Smale secured the company of a neighbour and the pair departed to the Lodge to investigate. There a tragic revelation awaited them. Notwithstanding the pouring rain and the lateness of the hour, the front door stood wide open. Lights burned in the hall and in the dining-room, and, entering, in the latter they found the owner of the mansion, Mr. Henry Bayhurst, lying on the floor with a bullet wound in his head. The unfortunate gentleman was quite dead, and as no weapon was found near the body or in the room, it appeared that he had been murdered.

"Seated in a chair, rocking herself to and fro, and at times laughing in a crazy fashion, was a middle-aged woman, a stranger, shabbily dressed, her clothing soaked as if she had been out in the rain, who on being questioned could give no intelligible answer either about herself or the tragedy which had occurred. There is a telephone in the house, and Mr. Smale rang up the police who arrived with great promptitude and immediately began their investigations of what, on the face of things is a complete mystery, though no

doubt, when the maids are able to give a coherent account and the police have had time to complete their inquiries, some elucidation of the tragic occurrence will be forthcoming."

As he finished reading, Guy Shortland continued to stare at the paper, absorbed in thought, his companion quite forgotten. He recalled the flashes he had seen last night as he had run past the window where Bayhurst and the woman and Soulsby and the others were assembled. Unquestionably that had been the moment when the tragedy had occurred. But who had fired these shots? Soulsby or——

"A dreadful business," the clergyman's voice broke on his thoughts. "And since you knew the murdered gentleman, I have no doubt you find it very disturbing."

"Very!" answered Shortland, truthfully enough, as he returned the paper.

"And utterly mysterious. That woman, now a stranger, the account says, would you say she had anything to do with the murder?"

"Can't say!" answered Shortland almost curtly, realising the danger of discussion. "I suppose the police will establish the connection if it is there."

"Ah, yes, the police! A great institution—our English police force, the admiration and envy of the world. No doubt they will clear the matter up in a very short time. At any rate one hopes they will. It is not pleasant to think of an undetected murderer roaming in our midst."

The cleric gave himself anew to his paper, and Shortland took up the thread of his broken thought.

Had Soulsby or one of his companions fired those shots? Or, a possible alternative to be faced, Dan Lyncourt? The inspector could be ruled out. The woman who had claimed to be Bayhurst's wife, goaded and desperate, might have done it, but it did not seem to him to be very likely, and there remained—

He tautened as the thought came to him. In the moment before those shots had been fired someone had switched off the lights, and almost immediately afterwards Arthur Stoodley had run from the rear of the house. He recalled the signs of stress the man had shown, and in turn remembered the unexplained halt at Newbridge and the further halt at Holne Bridge, when he had thrown something that gleamed into the river. Had he fired the killing shot? And was the thing that he had thrown into the Dart a pistol?

It seemed possible, but why had he shot Bayhurst, knowing that Sybil's father would remain to be reckoned with, even though he married Sybil? . . . But apart from the two things he had witnessed, the man had not behaved like a murderer. He had been cool enough at the police station last night, and he had shown nothing of the reluctance to go there that a man conscious of his guilt of a capital crime might have exhibited. His thought reverted to Harlowe. There was no mention of him or the others in the newspaper account, but it seemed

incredible that he could have remained in ignorance of the crime that had been committed, and equally incredible that he should have withheld his knowledge of the affair from the authorities. Was it possible that the violent nature of Lyncourt had broken loose, and was Harlowe in excessive loyalty trying to shield him from the consequence of a mad act?

One thing was certain, the police could not long be ignorant of the tragedy. Those two scared domestics whom he had seen in the gallery—probably the two girls mentioned in the newspaper account—had no doubt seen all the visitors to the house last night, and however ignorant of the identity of the others, one of them must have recognised Lyncourt and himself. That was bound to come out, and he had little doubt that before the day was over he would find himself in the position of having to answer some very awkward questions. He was wondering whether it would be safe to conceal the facts about Sybil's father, when the taxi-cab, descending a steep hill, entered Dunsford street; and a second later the clergyman began to fold his paper.

“Here we are with six minutes to spare; and there, if I mistake not the anxious look upon his face, is the bridegroom.”

Shortland looked hastily through the window and standing by the little iron gate of the church saw Arthur Stoodley, no doubt aware of the local clergyman's indisposition, and from his expression, apprehensive lest there should be some eleventh hour frustration of his plans. Sybil was not in

sight, but as the taxi-cab drew up by the gate, through the window he caught sight of her standing in the shadow of the porch, and the next moment, leaning well back, heard Stoodley addressing the clergyman as he opened the door.

"You have come to officiate at a marriage for Mr.—er—What's-his-name?"

"Yes," the clergyman answered genially. "So there is no need for you to be anxious. I shall be ready to serve you within four minutes."

Shortland had an inspiration. Opening the farther door, he slipped out, moved swiftly round the vehicle, and was hurrying up to the porch before Stoodley was aware of him. He heard him shout, caught hurried steps behind him, but did not turn round, for in that moment Sybil caught sight of him, and with a white and stricken look upon her face reeled against the side of the porch.

"Oh!" she whispered as he reached her. "You! . . . how . . . did—"

The sound of near footsteps told Shortland that the other was close behind.

"Sybil," he said, "you must not do this thing. There is no need. You do not understand. Your father has nothing whatever to fear from Inspector Harlowe—"

A hand gripped his shoulder.

"Out of the way you infernal meddler! How you came here I don't know—"

Shortland laughed. "I came with the clergyman for whom I am a little sorry, for his journey is wasted.

Sybil is not going to marry you to-day or any other day."

"Indeed. Well that is not for you to say. Sybil knows her mind." He looked at the white-faced girl. "You had better settle with this interloper. When he hears the truth from your own lips——"

"Oh!" whispered the girl, brokenly. "You do not understand. I . . . I must."

"No, you must not, Sybil! . . . You shall not. You do not know what you are doing. . . . This man is a blackmailer badly wanted by the Australian police——"

"Liar!"

"He and Bayhurst brought those three ruffians to England in the hope that they would dispose of your father. It is Dan Lyncourt's money he is after. Look at him and you will know the truth as your father knows it, and as Inspector Harlowe knows——"

"Inspector Harlowe!" cried Sybil tensely. "He is alive?"

"He was at eleven o'clock last night, when I last saw—— Ah! I understand. This man told you he was dead, I suppose?"

"He said . . . oh! he said that my father . . . had . . . had——"

"He said that he had shot Harlowe on the moor yesterday? Was that what he said? Yes. I can see it was. And that was the way he persuaded you to come here this morning. But I wonder how he knew? As it happens a shot was fired at

the inspector, and the man who fired it unquestionably thought that he had killed him. Three people other than the man who did the firing knew of it. Your father, Harlowe and myself, and we told no one of the incident. . . . How does this man know? Ask him, Sybil! No. There is no need. Look at him. That is sufficient."

It was more than sufficient. Stoodley's face, white with fear, his eyes flashing with apprehension, revealed the truth.

" You see, Sybil, yesterday morning he rode a grey horse. I saw it on the moor a little time after the shot had been fired at David Harlowe——"

" His reverence be ready an' waitin', zir."

The interruption came from a verger who had appeared at the church door, and who stared at the trio in open wonder.

" Tell him there will be no marriage this morning," said Shortland tersely.

" But, zir——"

" Wait!" said Stoodley, recovering a little. Then he turned to Sybil. " You know the consequences. There is that old crime in Australia. The warrant has never been withdrawn—it is only pigeon-holed. If you refuse now because of a mere cock-and-bull story, I shall go straight from here to give information, and in that case you will be the cause of——"

" Do not listen, Sybil. He dare not go to the authorities. They would be only too glad to see him."

Stoodley laughed harshly. "You think so? Well, I shall take the risk! Either Sybil marries me or Dan Lyncourt expiates that old crime on the——"

The last word was drowned in the shriek of a motor horn. The shriek was repeated immediately, and was of such obvious urgency, that instinctively all three turned to look for the cause. A car coming down the street at a great speed missed a milk float by an ace. It pulled up at the church gates with a sharpness that made the brakes screech. Before any of the three could move or speak, two men in uniform leaped out. One of them was the sergeant who had been so anxious to atone for the mistake of a subordinate a few hours before, the other wore an inspector's uniform. The sergeant looked at the group by the porch, said something to his companion, and both of them passed through the gates and walked quickly forward. Stoodley made a sharp movement, and a startled whisper broke from him.

"My God! Police! What do they want—here?"

CHAPTER XVIII

DETAINED

AT STOODLEY'S whispered question Guy Shortland looked swiftly at him. The man's face was white as chalk, and there was a hunted look in his eyes. Beyond question he was desperately afraid. Why? Not because of the false charge he had made last night—surely. That—

His thoughts got no further. The inspector and the sergeant had reached the porch, and the former addressed Shortland.

“ You are Guy Shortland? ” he asked.

“ That is my name.”

“ Then I am afraid you must come along with me.” As the inspector made his polite demand Guy Shortland was vividly aware of two things—firstly, of a swift change in Stoodley's face, which lost its apprehensive look, whilst an immense relief shone in his eyes; and, secondly, of the startled, frightened face of Sybil. Conjecturing what lay behind the demand, he was more disturbed than he would have owned, but his demeanour was outwardly cool.

“ Perhaps you will tell me why? I have, I think, a right to know that, even to see your warrant if you are arresting me.”

“ There is no warrant—yet. I am merely taking you to be detained—on suspicion.”

"Of what?"

The inspector—a humane man—glanced at Sybil.

"Perhaps you would like me to give you that information in private?"

Shortland also looked at Sybil, and saw the startled fear in her face, but she shook her head.

"No," he said coolly. "I will hear the reason here—before these people."

"As you will. Last night, in his house at Harford Lodge, Mr. Henry Bayhurst was found shot—"

A startled, shocked cry came from Sybil, and Shortland caught her arm, fearing she would faint.

"Steady," he whispered. "You need fear for—no one!"

"You know that?" demanded the inspector.

"Yes. I read it in the newspaper as I came here."

"It is an undoubted case of murder. You are known to have been in the house at the time with certain men who were threatening the murdered man—"

"Not with them, inspector."

The officer ignored the interruption. "This morning a cap was found in the garden, it had your name in it—"

"Yes. It is mine. I lost it in the rain and darkness—"

"You own it?" The officer was a little non-plussed. "You admit you were there when—"

"No! I was out of the house when two shots were fired—by whom I did not see, though I saw

the flashes and heard the reports. I did not know what had happened until I was shown the newspaper by the clergyman who is in the church here."

The inspector clung doggedly to his purpose. "You are one of two men known to have been at the dead man's house at the time he was killed. There were others, only one of whom was recognised, and you are known to have had a sharp disagreement with Mr. Bayhurst earlier in the day. He ordered you from his house, I am informed."

"Scarcely that! . . . This man here was present on the occasion. No doubt he will inform you as to what actually occurred."

A look of interest came on the inspector's face as he turned to Arthur Stoodley.

"You knew Mr. Bayhurst?"

"Intimately, I was his guest. And the news of his death is a great shock. I left last night, but was returning to-day. And I can tell you this, that if Mr. Bayhurst did not actually kick this man out of his house, it was not because he lacked the will."

"Is that so?" The inspector was interested and showed it.

"Yes. Shortland insisted on remaining after Mr. Bayhurst had dismissed him, and my host shut the door in his face, making a strong remark at the same time."

"Um! There was a difference between them?"

"Yes. The man persisted in forcing his attentions on Mr. Bayhurst's ward—this lady—Miss Lyncourt—"

"No!" broke in Sybil quickly. "He was waiting for a message from me, that was all."

"And Mr. Bayhurst disapproved," explained Stoodley. "He disapproved so strongly that he told Shortland that he could wait till hell's fires were clinkers, but he should not see his ward."

"That is interesting." The inspector looked from one to the other of the two men, then he asked another question. "You yourself do not like Mr. Shortland?"

"Well," laughed Stoodley easily. "I don't look on him with brotherly regard. You see we are rivals for this lady's hand."

"And last night you brought a false charge against him, I understand?"

Stoodley owned it brazenly. "It was the constable who made the charge first. I merely corroborated it, but had no intention of pressing it, you know."

"Why did you support the charge if you did not mean to substantiate it?"

"All's fair in love and war. I was going to be married this morning, and I did not want the man butting in at the ceremony. I felt he was mad enough for anything, and his presence here this morning is evidence that I was right. It was all done on the spur of the moment, with the idea of avoiding an unpleasant scene."

"Um! . . . And you are going to be married, now?"

"No!"

The word came from Sybil, and was spoken with decision. Stoodley's face flushed with anger, and when he turned to look at the girl, there was a threat in his eyes. Sybil saw it and disregarded it, and the officer turned to her.

"Mr. Bayhurst was your guardian. I gather you did not know about his death until just now?"

"I have not heard a word. It was a great shock to me."

"When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday morning. I have been in Exeter since then." The inspector considered again; then he addressed himself to Shortland.

"I think you must come with me, Mr. Shortland, I have no alternative. You were at Harford Lodge at the time of the murder; and the other man who was recognised has disappeared completely as have the others who were not known. No doubt you will wish to make a statement which may be an adequate explanation of your presence there, but this is not the place to do it, as you will see."

"I quite see that."

"Then if you are ready——"

"This lady," said Shortland quickly, "she may accompany me?"

"No need," said Stoodley, "I will look after Miss Lyncourt."

"No," said Sybil, simply. "No! I will go with Mr. Shortland."

A spasm of rage twisted Stoodley's handsome face.

He took a step towards Sybil, then checking his wrath asked in a restrained way ;—

“ Do you think you are acting wisely ? ”

“ Yes ! ” answered Sybil and turning away, ignored the man utterly.

The inspector, a shrewd man, marked the incident ; and considered Stoodley again. Then spoke to him.

“ Mr. Stoodley, I think it is desirable that I should be informed of your address. You were Mr. Bayhurst’s guest, and your evidence of what took place yesterday may be material. The inquest will be held this afternoon at Harford Lodge, and I think it is essential that you should be there.”

Shortland watched Stoodley as the inspector spoke but detected no signs of perturbation.

“ Then I shall be there. My immediate address is in Exeter, and I will drive back there now with you. I have a car up at the village.”

“ Good ! And at the office it will be as well if you make a statement and sign it for form’s sake. Perhaps you will oblige me by taking the sergeant with you. There is no need to overcrowd my car.”

“ With pleasure.”

“ Then we will start at once. For me this morning promises to be a very busy one, and I am anxious to return as soon as possible.”

They started without delay, the inspector with Sybil and her lover, the sergeant as arranged in Stoodley’s car, and on the way the inspector conversed with Shortland as man to man.

“ Mr. Shortland, we might save time, if we talked

now. I will confess that I have changed my mind about you. When I came to Dunsford I had an idea that you had been somehow concerned in Mr. Bayhurst's death. Now, I do not believe it. Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me all you know. It might help me a great deal."

"I am quite willing."

"Then who were those men who were at Harford Lodge last night?"

"Three of them were discharged Australian convicts who were, I think, trying to blackmail Bayhurst. The other two were Mr. David Harlowe and a retired inspector of Queensland police."

Deliberately he gave Lyncourt his self-chosen name seeking to avoid compromising him as much as possible. The inspector, naturally enough, fixed on the more startling item of his information.

"Three ex-convicts and a retired inspector! Great Harry! That's surprising information! There's more in Bayhurst's death than meets the eye! . . . But you were not with the convicts, surely?"

"No! I was with Mr. Harlowe and the inspector. We found those men in possession when we arrived there."

"But why did you go?"

"We were looking for Miss Lyncourt here, who had been missing since the afternoon. Mr. Harlowe is a relative of hers, and I had her promise to marry me——"

"Phew!" The man swung round to Sybil.

"And this morning you were going to marry Mr. Stoodley?"

"Under pressure, as perhaps you may have guessed, inspector," intervened Shortland. "There's no need to go into that."

"No! Perhaps not! You found these men in possession, I understood you to say."

"Yes. They were trying to blackmail Bayhurst, having brought that woman who was found—"

"Ah! Who is that woman?"

"They gave her a name—Chinkie Jane; but she was Bayhurst's wife long ago in Australia. At any rate the woman claimed him, and those three seemed to be assured of the rightness of her claim."

The inspector whistled again. "Deeper waters still. I met Mr. Bayhurst once or twice. I should never have thought he had a secret of that sort in his life. By all accounts that woman is . . . er . . . impossible."

"I fancy Bayhurst had other secrets besides his marriage—the ex-convicts seemed to know him very well, and had other grounds for trying to blackmail him. They must have had, for they only came upon the woman by accident, just as they were entering the house."

"She was there already?"

"Yes! Waiting outside. She had passed the Queensland inspector and myself whilst we were waiting—she and another person."

"Do you know who that was?"

"Yes—Arthur Stoodley."

“ The deuce ! ”

The inspector stared in amazement for a moment, then deliberately he turned and through the lozenge window at the back, took a look at the following car. When he turned again he was frowning, and it was quite three minutes before he spoke.

“ Miss Lyncourt, Mr. Bayhurst was your guardian, wasn’t he ? ”

“ Yes ! ”

“ And he pressed you to marry Mr. Stoodley, perhaps ? ”

“ Yes.”

The inspector nodded to himself, then turned to Shortland. “ Stoodley was at Harford Lodge, then, almost immediately before these shots were fired ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Um ! I must have a talk with Mr. Stoodley.”

“ No ! Don’t ! ” said Shortland impulsively. “ Let the whole thing come as a surprise. You will get the truth that way—at the inquest, I mean. I should say it is almost certain that Harlowe or the inspector will turn up at the inquest ; and they may have news that will confirm a suspicion of mine, which is no more than a suspicion at present —so that I prefer not to put it in words. . . . But —my word ; yes, if they should not come, there is another way of proving it. When we get to Exeter, I will ask you to do something which will prove or disprove what is in my mind.”

“ You are very mysterious, Mr. Shortland.”

“ With reason—believe me. But if you will

follow my instructions, I think this whole business may be cleared up almost at once."

"Well—I shall listen to your instructions with interest," said the inspector with a dry laugh.

At Exeter in a private room, he listened with infinite amazement to Shortland's further account of his adventures of the previous night; and when the account had been reduced to a precise statement and signed, he grew affable.

"I think I need not keep you longer, Mr. Shortland, but I would prefer you not to show yourself in Exeter this morning. It seems best to let a certain individual remain under the impression that you are detained. But if you wish to return to Holne, whilst Mr. Stoodley is making his statement, I will have you smuggled into a taxi with Miss Lyncourt."

"I should be very much obliged if you would."

"Then it is settled. The inquest is fixed for two o'clock. You will be there without fail?"

"Yes!"

Ten minutes later with Sybil by his side he was driving from the city. Once they were away from the police station, Sybil asked quickly.

"Oh, what is the meaning of it all?"

"The meaning of it all is very simple, I think, and it is that, by hook or crook, Arthur Stoodley meant to marry you. . . . Yesterday, as you have told me, he brought a final argument, saying that your father had killed or tried to kill Inspector Harlowe——"

“Y-e-s-s, but——”

“Things have gone a little askew. He had meant that those three ruffians should kill your father, as they pretty nearly did, and he was tying Bayhurst’s hands by bringing that woman of whom you heard to keep him busy. She was, it seemed, Henry Bayhurst’s legal wife.”

He said nothing of Lyncourt’s association with the woman. That he considered was a thing that Sybil did not need to know, and he did not speak until the girl’s next question.

“But who . . . who . . . shot——”

“Not Mr. Lyncourt! That is certain. Some one switched out all the lights; and that was the person who fired, I am morally certain. . . . But possibly we shall find out when we get to Holne, if Inspector Harlowe is there. . . . Your father saved his life once, and they are quite friendly. I have no doubt he will be trying to keep your father out of this trouble—and he will certainly do so if he can.”

“And Arthur Stoodley said that my father had killed or tried to kill——” she broke off, and shivered, then in a shuddering whisper added, “Oh, how evil he is!”

“Evil enough!” agreed Shortland. “Last night he gave me in charge for attempting robbery with violence.”

“Oh. . . . I did not know!”

“No. Your father and Harlowe and myself were trying to find you. We thought those three scoundrels had got hold of you—then I had an idea

and followed Stoodley to Exeter. I guessed what was in the wind and tried desperately to find you——”

“ My dear——”

“ Where were you ? ”

“ I stayed at a friend’s house. Arthur Stoodley knew where, and came very late to assure himself that I had arrived safely, and to tell me what he had arranged.”

“ That would be when I saw him. . . . After I had been taken to the police station I lost him altogether ; and being able to learn nothing of you I was in despair. . . . Then luck—no ! Providence saved me. I overheard a clergyman asking for a taxi to take him to Dunsford to perform a wedding ceremony ; and it came to me in a flash that there was where I should find you. I can’t explain why I thought so. But it was a conviction—one of those flashes of intuition that are more sure than knowledge. It was at any rate the last forlorn hope—and I followed it ; and on the way, I learned of the tragedy which had befallen at Harford Lodge.”

“ I am . . . glad that . . . that you were in time.”

“ If I had been too late——” He checked himself. It was no use telling her of the mad impulse of which he had been conscious in the night. “ But thank God, I was in time. That is what really matters ; though there may be trouble for us ahead, yet.”

Sybil guessed what was in his mind.

“ My father——”

“ Don’t worry till the need arises. Inspector

Harlowe is friendly, and he knows that your father long ago atoned for the sin of his youth. Also, we know that it was André who was responsible for the shooting your father was credited with. . . . Unless Arthur Stoodley makes the revelation, the inspector will, I am assured, keep Dan Lyncourt out of his story. I only hope we shall find him when we get to Holne."

They drove straight to the Church House Inn, and as they drew up, through the window Shortland caught sight of the inspector taking an observation of the car and its occupants.

"He's there! . . . Thank heaven!" said Shortland, and led Sybil inside.

Inspector Harlowe greeted them quietly.

"An hour later than I expected," he said. Then asked abruptly: "You've had the news of Bayhurst, of course?"

"Yes!" answered Shortland. "And have made a statement to the police."

"A statement! Phew! . . . That may be awkward for . . . for Dan."

"I told him nothing about him except what they knew—and that is that, as Mr. Harlowe, he was present. The maids have told so much, I guessed."

"Where is he?"

"Safe on his way to Overstowey with Adams. He has a bullet wound in his shoulder."

"Oh!" cried Sybil in distress.

"Don't worry, my dear child. There's no need. The bullet wound is a small thing; my main concern

is lest his old identity should be spread abroad, which it won't be if I can prevent it."

"I told you so, Sybil," said Shortland, and then asked quickly. "What happened last night? I saw flashes and heard two shots——"

"It was then when the lights went out that the thing happened. Somebody must have had Bayhurst marked and Lyncourt too——" he broke off and inquired. "You found Arthur Stoodley?"

"Yes!"

"Where? . . . He came from the house——"

"After?"

The word was weighed with significance, and as Shortland understood, nodded without speaking, the inspector snapped his fingers.

"I knew it! . . . Know where he is now?"

"In Exeter, making a statement to the police."

"Then he's sure got a nerve!"

"He will be coming along to the inquest."

"That so? Well, it will be an interesting exhibition of a man putting his head in the lion's mouth. But I shan't believe it till I see it. My idea is that he will make tracks for anywhere than Harford, just as soon as he has finished his interview with the police."

"I fancy the authorities will see that he comes, or at any rate will keep track of him."

"Oh! They know a thing or two then?"

"Yes! But I'll keep the secret until this afternoon. Where are those three scoundrels——"

"Heaven knows! When I got the lights on

again at Harford and we saw Bayhurst lying there, with Dan leaning against the wall, they were gone. I thought I'd heard them running a little time before. I guess they saw themselves in the soup with a vengeance and started to get out just as fast as they could. It's the last we shall see of them, I'll wager, for if they're not running yet, it's because they've worn their legs out."

"Then Lyncourt has nothing further to fear from them?"

"They'll make no indiscreet revelations at any rate."

"But Stoodley——"

"Yes! He may do the Samson act and pull the whole house down about him. That's the risk. But there's no avoiding it. Maybe he'll find his own hands too full to bother. And if the worst comes to the worst—Dan is well out of the way. . . . What are you going to do now?"

"Go to my place and change and breakfast." Shortland looked at Sybil. "Perhaps, my dear, you would like to have a little talk with Inspector Harlowe."

It was Harlowe who replied.

"For sure, she would. Off you go, my son. Sit down, child. Maybe I can ease your mind a whole lot before he comes back."

And Sybil, already reassured, sat down to hear whatever the kindly-hearted inspector might have to say.

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAST HEDGE

FIVE minutes before the time fixed for the inquest, Guy Shortland, accompanied by Sybil, entered the large dining-room at Harford, which the coroner had selected for the court room. The day being warm and windless, one of the windows—a French window—was half open, and the coroner's table had been placed in the other window, that he might have his back to the light. The jurymen, mostly small farmers, were already assembled, the coroner was in conversation with the inspector who had charge of the case, and in addition there were two or three policemen, whilst at one end of the room, outwardly very cool and apparently much at home, ostentatiously reading a newspaper, was Arthur Stoodley. The two maids whom Shortland had seen in the gallery last night were on a small settee, white-faced and plainly very nervous.

On their entrance Stoodley stood up and a flash of hate came in his eyes as they fell on Shortland ; but the latter took no notice, and a minute later accompanied Sybil and the inspector to look on the corpse for the purpose of identification, the unpleasant duty falling to Sybil in the absence of the dead man's sister. Three minutes later the proceedings proper began. The preliminaries were gone through with

despatch ; Sybil's identification was accepted without any additional question ; and the farmer who had found Bayhurst dead, gave his account of his discovery of the body. As he finished doing so, Inspector Harlowe entered the room and took his seat a little way from Shortland, at a place where he could watch Stoodley.

One of the policemen—a sergeant from Ashburton—next detailed how, in response to an urgent message, he had hurried to Harford, and had found the deceased man lying on the floor, dead as described by the previous witness, without finding any lethal weapon though he had searched diligently ; whilst the doctor called by the sergeant testified that the deceased had died from a bullet wound, the bullet produced having penetrated the brain, so that he must have been killed instantaneously. The two maids followed, one of them giving a rather incoherent account of the intrusion of the three strangers and the woman on the previous night ; and when the coroner asked if anyone else had been in the house at the time, testified how three others had entered and had remained in the hall up to the time the lights had been extinguished. At the sound of the shots her companion had fainted, and she herself had no distinct remembrance of what followed.

The coroner wrote diligently for a minute or two, and Guy Shortland, conjecturing what his next question would be, waited a little tensely. The question came at last.

"There were three men, you say, watching in the hall—did you recognise any of them?"

"Yes, sir? One was Mr. Harlowe, a friend of Mr. Bayhurst, and the other was Mr. Shortland."

"And the third? You did not know him?"

"No, sir."

"You would recognise him if you saw him again?"

"Y-yes, sir."

The answer was accompanied by an involuntary turning of the eyes towards Inspector Harlowe, and the coroner gave a quite unnecessary instruction.

"Look round the room and tell me if you see the third man here."

"That gentleman there, sir," answered the girl, indicating Harlowe.

"You are sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there was no one else in the house?"

"No, sir. Mr. Stoodley had been there a little while before, but he had gone out to look for Miss Lyncourt, about whom Mr. Bayhurst had been worrying, she having been absent for some hours."

"And he did not return, last night?"

"No, sir. Not whilst I was in the house, sir."

The other maid having tearfully corroborated, the coroner glanced round the room, looked at Harlowe, and when Shortland was anticipating that he would be the next witness, to his surprise the name of Arthur Stoodley was called.

The new witness came forward coolly enough, took the oath, and answering the coroner's

questions, denied all first-hand knowledge of the events of the previous night. It was quite true as the maid had said that he had been absent from the house at the time of the tragic occurrence, ostensibly to look for Miss Lyncourt, in reality to go to Exeter where he knew Miss Lyncourt had gone, having arranged to do so beforehand, as Miss Lyncourt and he were to have been quietly married in the morning.

“Quietly or secretly?”

“Well, secretly, if you like, sir.”

“Then Mr. Bayhurst, Miss Lyncourt’s guardian, was opposed to the projected union?”

“No, sir! He quite approved of it.”

“Then why the secrecy?”

“A whim of Miss Lyncourt’s—who had another wooer, who she thought might interfere; and who, as a matter of fact, almost forced his way into this house in an attempt to communicate with her yesterday, but was dismissed a little harshly by Mr. Bayhurst.”

“Indeed! That is interesting. The name of this gentleman, please?”

“Guy Shortland—who the previous witnesses testified was present when——”

“Thank you! And Mr. Shortland was not *persona grata* with Mr. Bayhurst?”

“Very much the contrary.”

“You think that Mr. Shortland may have resented Mr. Bayhurst’s attitude?”

“He must have the spirit of a mouse if he didn’t.”

" You went to Exeter, you say? How did you go? "

" By car. I drove myself."

" Alone? "

" Yes."

" Did you see anyone—I mean speak to anyone on the way there? "

For a fraction of time Stoodley hesitated—sufficiently long for the pause to be noticeable, then he announced coolly: " Yes, I saw and spoke to a constable by Holne Bridge where I had pulled up to look at the swollen water of the river—never having seen the Dart in flood."

The coroner wrote for a moment, then asked: " About the three men whom a previous witness spoke of as invading the house, have you any idea who they were? "

" Not the slightest! "

" And that woman they brought with them, who was found in the room here after they had gone. Do you know her at all, or can you give any indication of her identity? As a friend of Mr. Bayhurst's you may have some idea who she is? "

" I have none, sir—never having seen the woman."

" You did not know then that she was the wife of Mr. Bayhurst? "

" No. I was not aware that he had a wife. The news is a complete surprise to me."

" As to most people, I imagine. . . . As an intimate of Mr. Bayhurst can you suggest any reason why any one should have shot him? "

"Well, as I told you, Shortland may have represented Mr. Bayhurst's attitude to him."

"Sufficiently to make him stoop to such a crime, you mean to say?"

"Well you never know how far a man with a grievance will go."

"No. That is quite true. . . . Thank you, I think that is all."

Stoodley returned to his seat a little jauntily, and after a moment's whispered conversation with the officer in charge, the coroner gave instructions for the next witness to be called.

"David Harlowe."

The inspector stepped forward, took the oath, and waited for his examination to begin.

"Mr. Harlowe, you are an inspector of the Queensland police?"

"Retired—on pension, sir!"

"You have heard two witnesses testify that you were present here at or about the time that Mr. Bayhurst was shot. Is that true?"

"Quite true, sir. I was in the hall when the lights went out and the two shots were fired."

"Then you were an eye-witness of the crime?"

"As far as one could be in the dark."

"Yes! I understand. The darkness would make things a little difficult; but perhaps you have some idea where the shots were fired from? Would you say they were fired by one or more of those three men who were baiting the deceased?"

"No, sir. They were standing by the door—and

the shots were not fired there. I will stake my life on that."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because the flashes were in front of me—facing, and across the room, and I saw the spurt of the flame clearly, which I could not have done had the shots been fired by anyone with his back towards me."

"Then you know the exact place—or nearly so whence the shots were fired?"

"Yes, sir. I saw and marked it at the time. It was from the buttery-hatch or whatever you call it over there. He indicated the hatch in question, and the coroner considered it for a moment before his next question.

"Then there must have been someone on the other side?"

"There was! In the flash I saw a man's face, white and rather vague—but still I saw it."

"And you recognised it?"

"I am not sure, sir! It must be remembered that I saw it only in two flashes, not a very long time to see and register a face in one's memory."

"But you are convinced that someone was there behind the buttery-hatch, and that he fired two shots, one of which killed Mr. Bayhurst?"

"I am certain."

"Would you recognise the man's face again?"

"If I saw it in the same circumstances, I think I might. You see, the flash of one explosion and then of the other, lit up the aperture for two successive moments; the effect was that of a weak and very

brief magnesium flash for photographic purposes. The outline of the hatch was like the frame for a living picture."

" You have an idea of the man's identity ? "

" An idea—yes ! " The inspector paused and then added quickly. " To be quite candid, I do not think the idea was derived from the glimpse I had of the man when he was at the buttery-hatch ; and whilst naturally one tends to link up events with ideas one has conceived of them, I do not think the idea can be offered as a just identification of the man."

" That is very fair of you. . . . You did not see the man afterwards ? "

" No, sir. Naturally the confusion was great, and it was some time before the light was switched on again, so that he had ample time to get away."

There was a pause, filled in by the scratching of the coroner's pen, and in the brief time it offered, Shortland stole a glance at Arthur Stoodley. The man was sitting in a rather crouching position, a tense look on his face, his eyes fixed on the witness ; very keen, with something more than mere interest, and as Shortland thought, he had the demeanour of a man anticipating something that had not yet manifested itself.

The coroner's voice raised inquisitorily, broke on the thought.

" What became of the other men who were present when the shots were fired ? "

“They ran pell-mell.”

“And you? What did you do?”

“My first concern was to get the lights on, and learn what had happened. That took a little time, and when I had found the switch, which is in a recess in the kitchen which communicated with the hatch there, I had my hands full with that crazy woman and the maids whom I despatched for help—though apparently they have no remembrance of the fact. . . . I also tried to get through by telephone to the police, but the line was engaged; and I started to search the house and grounds for any trace of the man who had fired the shots, and when I returned I found Mr. Smale and his friend in the room, having come in response to the summons I had sent.”

“You found no trace of the man?”

“None—except an open side door through which in all probability he made his escape.”

The coroner nodded and finished his examination of the witness with an abruptness that inclined Shortland to the belief that it was pre-arranged. His own name was called, and after consulting a document before him which the witness guessed was his own statement to the police, the coroner asked his first question.

“You have heard two of the witnesses declare that you were present when these three men were in this room last night. You do not challenge the truth of that statement?”

“I have already admitted it to the police.”

"Yes, so I gather. Were you in the house when the shots were fired?"

"No. I had just left the house. But I saw the flashes and heard the reports as I passed the window."

"You did not turn back?"

"No. I knew that the last witness was more capable than I of dealing with any situation that might arise from the firing of these shots, and I had an urgent purpose in view. I wanted to find Miss Lyncourt, which was the reason I had gone to the house at all."

"You thought she might be in the grounds?"

"No! But I thought I might find the person whom I suspected of knowledge of her whereabouts. So I watched for him!"

"You saw him?"

"Yes. I saw him leave the house and run to a car which was standing with all lights out and the engine running."

"You knew him—recognised him?"

"No. Not at the moment."

"But——later?"

"Yes! Convinced that the man who had come from the side door was the one I was looking for, and that he was going to Miss Lyncourt, I slipped into the back of the car before he reached it, and was there crouching on the floor when the car was driven away."

"To what place was the car driven?"

"To Exeter."

"And you went the whole way?"

“Yes.”

The coroner consulted the document before him, and then asked. “Did you make the whole journey without a stop?”

“No! We stopped twice—once at Newbridge and once at Holne Bridge, when the driver left the car and threw something into the water.”

There was a slight movement behind him as he answered, made as he guessed by Arthur Stoodley, but no one took any notice of it, and the coroner continued his questions.

“You had recognised the man before that, I presume?”

“Yes. It was Arthur Stoodley.”

“You have no doubt of that?”

“None whatever. I had recognised him before we had left the grounds here, and at Holne when, he was talking to the policeman as he has described, I saw him quite clearly.”

“You say he threw something into the river. Have you any idea what that was?”

“An idea—nothing more. Perhaps I ought to say a guess. It was something that gleamed in the headlights as he threw it. That is all that I can say definitely.”

“And after that you drove on?”

“Yes!”

“Thank you. That will do for the moment. Call Sergeant Macklin.”

The sergeant stepped forward, and the coroner asked a question.

“ Acting on instructions this morning I understand you made an examination of the river in the neighbourhood of Holne Bridge ? ”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Did you find anything ? ”

“ Yes, sir. The river was rather swollen but the water was clear, and being quite free from weeds I was able to see the bottom, and after a careful search I saw something silvery gleaming there. With the aid of a hook on a long pole I managed to fish it out, and——”

The coroner pushed aside some papers, and picking up something they had concealed, held it towards the sergeant.

“ This is what you found ? ”

“ Yes, sir. That is the pistol. It was lying half covered with silt brought down by the flood——”

The words were broken by a sharp sound of movement behind the witness.

“ Quick ! ” shouted Harlowe.

“ Stop him ! ” roared the inspector.

As Shortland swung round there was a crash as a burly policeman, neatly tripped, went down ; and he saw Arthur Stoodley leap through the open window and fling it to behind him, so violently that the glass shivered and was thrown all over the room. For a moment complete confusion prevailed. The fallen policeman, picking himself up, tried to get through the broken window ; the jury, rising from their seats in their excitement, obstructed the other officers making for the door, and when they

were clear the fugitive had already three or four minutes' start. Shortland hurried to the window and with the coroner stood watching. As the three policemen and Harlowe passed along the terrace, the whirr of a starting car sounded, and a moment later the car itself came in sight, moving down the drive towards the gates with Stoodley at the wheel.

"A desperate attempt!" commented the coroner. "But perfectly hopeless. There are so few roads he can take off the moor."

The sergeant who had been giving evidence when the interruption occurred, returned to the house at the run, and taking up the telephone began to dial, then with the connection made, telephoned instructions.

"Sergeant Macklin speaking on inspector's instructions. Watch for dark blue four-seater car, No. AZ921. May make for Ashburton. Stop at all costs and detain driver who is wanted on serious charge. . . . Yes. AZ921. Better make a cordon and stop and examine all cars. Have in mind the man is desperate."

Quickly, and in turn, he rang up other moorland towns and places the fugitive might make for, and whilst he was so engaged another car swung down the drive with the inspector at the wheel and Harlowe and a constable in the rear seat. The coroner watched it out of sight, then he turned and looked for his jury, some of whom were already outside the house, the others seething with excitement standing

at the broken window. He looked at Shortland and smiled grimly.

"An adjournment seems desirable. There is no doubt what verdict would be given, but . . . er . . . well this is scarcely a judicial atmosphere, and an immediate decision is not essential."

The jurymen were called back to duty, and when the adjournment had been announced they left the house, making in an excited bunch for the gates. Only the maids and Sybil, Shortland and the coroner remained, and the latter spoke his thoughts aloud.

"He simply can't get away. He may leave his car and hide on the moor, but as the experience of fugitives from Princetown has proved often, the moor itself will be his gaoler. And the roads, well, you know them! All steep from here. If he takes too many risks there will be a smash. . . . I do not think it will be long before we have news."

"No," agreed Shortland. "And if he realises the position he may ride for the smash-up."

He moved across the room to Sybil, who looked at him with tragic eyes.

"You knew?" she whispered. "You knew—last night—"

"No?"

"This morning then?"

"I suspected when I saw the paper. Indeed, in my mind, I was sure."

"And that was why you sought me so earnestly?"

"No. I wanted to save you . . . but it was because I loved you."

"That man!" she whispered and then shuddered. "I did not think there was anyone so evil in the world."

"Do not think of him," he said. "The man is not worth it. Harlowe could tell you things about him that would show you how vile he is. . . . Come! You will not want to remain here in this house alone."

"But where can I go?"

"To my house at Holne. The maids can go there also. I will put up at the Church House with Harlowe till we can make better arrangements."

"Yes!" she agreed, then whispered: "My father?"

"He is all right. Don't worry. Nothing is likely to come out about that old business at Wallaby Hill now, unless Stoodley stands a trial, which I suspect he never will. Come, let us go."

* * * * *

An hour later Shortland's judgment was justified by Inspector Harlowe's account of what had befallen.

"Stoodley had a good start, as you know, and he must have driven like a madman. He went through the narrow twisting road in the hamlet at a break-neck speed, as we heard afterwards from people who saw him go, and he must have taken all the risks going down the hill to Newbridge. We took some ourselves—more than I liked—but we never glimpsed him once. None of us worried, however, for he'd taken the one road that was the easiest of

all to watch, and unless he turned into one of the few by-lanes, or left his car and took to the woods, he was as good as caught if he reached the main Plymouth road. We took the next hill a little less riskily, and before we reached Holne Bridge we knew the game was up, for a labourer ran towards us, shouting and waving frantically to us to stop.

“We drew up about where you must have done last night, and as the labourer gave an excited account about an accident and a man in the river, we dropped out of the car and ran towards the bridge.

“Stoodley’s blue car was smashed on the low parapet—some of which had been dislodged—a complete wreck, the bonnet and all the front of the machine crumpled like a concertina. There wasn’t an inch of glass left in the windscreen, and when the car hit the parapet he must have been shot clean through, over the bridge, into the river—a nasty neck-breaking drop.

“The river is pretty high after yesterday’s rain and we could see nothing of him in the neighbourhood of the bridge, but we found him lower down, his coat caught in a snag, and with some difficulty we fished him out.

“He was dead, of course; which is a good thing for him and everybody else, I reckon.”

“You think he meant to——”

“Lord knows! He can hardly have expected to make a complete getaway, but if he did it was the most foolish thought he ever entertained. . . .

And that bridge is an awkward one—narrow, a pretty quick turn, and a parapet a baby in arms could crawl over. If he went down the hill at the rattling pace he risked at Poundsgate and let go at the bottom and tried for the bridge, well, there was nothing else for it but the thing that happened. . . . As I reckon he knew very well, and for once he rode straight for the hedge—the biggest hedge of all—and took it. It's a better way of dying than hanging after all. A minute to make your mind and ten seconds to complete the business is a sight better than hours in a stuffy court, the solemn mummery of the black cap, three weeks of rotten anticipation watched by warders day and night, and then that chill morning walk to the scaffold."

"Yes, I daresay you're right."

"I know I am. I've seen men hanged—and Stoodley did the decent thing at last. He'd disgraced an honourable name quite enough as it was."

"Yes. . . . For a little time Guy Shortland was silent, then he asked: "What's going to be done about Dan Lyncourt?"

"Nothing. He's out of it. Most of the time I was supposed to be searching Harford Lodge grounds I was getting Dan safely away, and I finished it after the police had come, by running him up to that bungalow of his. Adams and I bandaged his shoulder, and we bundled him into his car and Adams drove away with him within an hour. I had a telegram at noon—'All serene'—no name,

which I guess came from him, and last night we settled what had already been arranged—that as soon as possible Dan's girl goes to my home in Rutland, whilst with the help of a lawyer I clean up Dan's affairs down here." He laughed. "But I expect she won't be with my old lady very long."

"I hope not," answered Shortland, with a fervency that made the other laugh again.

"Neither Dan nor his girl is likely to be troubled by Soulsby and company after last night; and I'll wager they're clearing out as fast as they can go at this moment. They're a bad lot, but not so bad as Bayhurst, who was a scarlet hypocrite. Dan, not knowing his record, shipped him and his sister to look after Sybil when her mother died, having met the man as a bush parson in Australia years ago. The sister was all right, but Bayhurst was a wrong one, scheming for years, I believe, to get hold of Dan's fortune; whilst Dan, for his little girl's sake, kept in the background, always afraid lest he should be caught up by that old affair and being anxious to save her from any disgrace through association with him. . . . As I read the thing, Bayhurst knew or got hold of his story, and Stoodley had it from his father's note books, just as he had news about Bayhurst from the same source. He found Bayhurst, met Miss Lyncourt, remembered the name, and got the facts about Dan out of the man, and then conspired with him to marry the girl and get hold of Dan's money. Between them (Stoodley's idea, I'll swear) they passed the word to Soulsby

and company, meaning that way to get rid of Dan as they pretty nearly did. . . . But Stoodley didn't play square with his partner. He never meant that they should have shares. Having arranged to marry Miss Lyncourt, when he pulled that pistol last night his idea was to put both Dan and Bayhurst clean out, and by making the girl his wife before she could hear what had happened, secure for himself the command of Dan's money. . . . I reckon he looked on the visit of Soulsby and his crowd as a godsend, since they'd surely get the blame for what happened. His attempt to involve you being only an afterthought."

"But that woman—Bayhurst's wife. I can't think why he brought her—"

"That was part of his original plan, I fancy. . . . I have a notion that there would have been an inquest up at Harford to-day, even if what happened last night hadn't occurred. That woman—a scorned wife, sodden with drink, was a good mark for an evil deed. In the extreme conjecture, if these two had been found dead with a pistol between them it wouldn't have been a very uncommon tragedy, a third of murderers kill their wives and then themselves, and in a milder reading the woman was bound to keep Bayhurst's attention occupied for the time. As things turned out, to have Bayhurst and Dan unexpectedly in conjunction, with those ruffians to take the blame, was an opportunity better than anything he could have devised, and he took it with blackguard courage. . . . And he

might have got away with it, remember, but for the chance of your seeing him leave the house, and being in his car when he threw away that pistol."

"Yes, thank God I thought of that car ; and that I was in time this morning to save Sybil from that ceremony."

"Good things, both !" Then Harlowe laughed. "But I reckon you'll be in time for a happier thing some morning before long. . . . And it will be a happy thing for Dan Lyncourt too. 'Old sins cast long shadows' is a time-worn saying that Dan knows, and Dan's old sin has thrown a pretty long and deep one, but it's wearing thin now and I reckon it will go altogether, when he gives Sybil to you at the altar."

"I hope so from my heart. Dan Lyncourt has his points ; and he saved my life——"

"And mine ! He has his points as you say—as enemy and as friend ; and I think you'll find them blossom into roses when he's a father-in-law."

"Sybil will be all sufficient for me. I can be almost grateful to Soulsby and André and Dandy Jim for what they did up at the bungalow, for it was that that brought me to Sybil."

"Yes ! Life's a rum thing the way it works out and round, and gives us sweetness out of the bitter."

Guy Shortland rose to go.

"I'll take the news to Sybil. She will be waiting."

"I wouldn't dwell on it overmuch, if you'll take an old man's advice. Miss Lyncourt has been

through quite enough harrying things of late . . . you'll have brighter things to talk about, I guess."

"Yes!"

"Things have been dark for that little girl; but now the sun will shine."

"Please God it shall!"

And, as if in prophecy, it shone brightly on the December day, two months later, when, with long care banished at last, Dan Lyncourt gave Sybil to her lover's arms.

THE END

